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LEGACY	Jayne Ann Krentz
MINGLED HEARTS	Vicki Lewis Thompson
LOVESPELL	Rosalind Carson
STARS IN HER EYES	Tracy Sinclair

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JAYNE ANN KRENTZ

Jayne Ann Krentz has been called one of today's top contemporary romance novelists. Her millions of fans just say she's terrific. Jayne has received many prestigious writing awards and has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. This multi-talented author is a born storyteller.

VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON

Vicki Lewis Thompson tried out a few careers before realizing that she could actually pay the bills as a romance writer. A former English teacher and newspaper reporter, Vicki knew this was the job for her—not only because she loves her job, but also because, as she says, “I have an overactive imagination!”



ROSALIND CARSON

Rosalind Carson began writing in 1970 and has since published nineteen books and over one hundred articles and short stories. A frequent lecturer at the Pacific Northwest Writers Conference, she previously taught short-story writing for Writers Digest School. Originally from England, Rosalind now lives in Ocean Shores, Washington.

TRACY SINCLAIR

Tracy Sinclair, author of more than thirty romance novels, also contributes to various magazines and newspapers. An extensive traveler and a dedicated volunteer worker, this California resident has accumulated countless fascinating experiences, settings and acquaintances to draw on in plotting her romances.

Harlequin
WORLD'S BEST
Romances

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader:

Welcome to the final issue in this volume of
WORLD'S BEST ROMANCES.

Thanks to people like you who have helped us to grow and flourish, we can proudly say that starting with the next issue we will be on our *third* volume of publication! And, in order to keep getting better and better, we have some wonderful surprises in store! Watch for our exciting new cover...horoscopes in every issue...more intriguing tidbits from the world of romance...more fun contests and prizes.

We'd also love to hear from you with your suggestions as to how we can continue to make this your romance magazine. So please, do write to us!

I'm sure the wonderful stories contained in this issue will provide great entertainment on the beach, at the cottage--or simply basking in any patch of sunlight, for that matter. Enjoy your summer!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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WORLD'S BEST

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JAYNE ANN KRENTZ

Legacy



As a member of the thoroughbred horse-racing industry, Conn was well respected in California. But Honor was about to discover the true man under the cool exterior.



He hadn't planned to move in on her this quickly, but Honor Mayfield was making it so easy he knew he would be a fool to waste the opening.

Constantine Landry sat alone in a private box at the Santa Anita Race-track. But his attention wasn't on the results of the second race, now being posted. Instead, he watched with calculating eyes as a woman with golden-brown hair walked quickly along an aisle in the grandstand behind him. She was following a flashily dressed man.

Might as well make it a parade, Landry thought as he got to his feet. The first strand of the web was waiting to be strung, and it looked to be a very strong anchor thread. Honor Mayfield, it appeared, was headed for trouble. Keeping her out of it would give him the kind of opening he needed.

Landry stalked her at a discreet distance. Around him people were hurrying to make their bets on the next race, and it was a little difficult keeping Honor in sight without closing in. She was only about five feet four inches tall, but the watermelon-pink of her shirt helped identify her in the crush of bettors. One of the tidbits of information Conn Landry had acquired about her was her passion for brilliantly hued clothes.

He increased his pace as she, in turn, hurried after the man in the avant-garde safari suit. His name was Granger and once again Landry won-

dered why Honor was interested in him. Granger was dangerous.

But, then, so was Constantine Landry. And as far as Honor Mayfield was concerned, she had more to fear from him than from Granger. She just didn't know it yet.

LEAVING THE grandstands behind, Honor felt a surge of nervous tension that almost broke her resolve. *Face it,* she told herself, *you don't really know what the hell you're doing.* Yet she had no choice.

The crowd thinned out as she followed Granger who now headed toward the parking-lot area that was reserved for owners, racetrack employees, trainers and similar types. She knew he hadn't parked there, because she'd seen him come through the front entrance an hour earlier.

Honor took a deep, steadying breath. Perhaps she should have hired a private detective. Someone who knew the people and rules of Granger's world. How did one approach a loan shark, anyway? Honor was trying to formulate a list of approaches when a man's hand closed around her arm.

"What the—? No! Let go of me!" The words came out in a gasp as she spun around to confront a stranger.

"Ladies intent on tailing people like Granger should take care not to wear shirts the color of ripe watermelon," the man said in a cool, gritty voice.

"I beg your pardon," Honor snapped icily, "but I have no idea what

you're talking about. Kindly let go of my arm before I scream for help."

The man gave her a curiously twisted smile that had no impact on his gun-metal-gray eyes. "You've already got help. I'm it."

She stared up at him, feeling very vulnerable. He wasn't quite six feet tall but there was a chilling power in his lean, hard frame. A bodyguard? she wondered. No, this man was infinitely more dangerous.

"Do you—work for Mr. Granger?" she heard herself ask uneasily and then realized she had just admitted to knowing Granger's name.

"No." The bleak smile stayed in place. "Only for myself. Constantine Landry. Call me Conn."

"Mr. Landry, I demand that you release me. I have something I must do," Honor said with soft urgency. Granger was even now disappearing from view.

"If you're talking about Granger, I'm afraid you'll have to think of a more pleasant way to spend the afternoon."

"You are working for that bastard!"

He slanted a wry glance down at her as he pulled her toward the guarded stable gate. "I've told you. I work only for myself."

"Then why are you interfering? And how do you know who Granger is?"

"A lot of people know. He's been involved in everything from loan sharking to drug dealing. Not a nice man. I can't help being curious about why a nice lady such as yourself is following him. Believe me, you don't want to go where Granger's going right now."

Honor stared up at Conn Landry's savagely carved profile. "Just where is Granger going?"

"Straight into a police trap. He's been set up."

She dug in the high heels of her turquoise leather sandals. "How do you know all this? Who are you, Conn Landry?"

He turned to confront her questioning hazel eyes. "That's simple. I'm the man who's saving your sweet tail. Just how would you explain your presence to the cops when they closed in on Granger and found you, too?"

"I don't understand any of this!"

"That's obvious. And that's why you should stay clear. Come along, lady in the watermelon shirt. I want to introduce you to a friend of mine."

Confused and wary, Honor again found herself being led toward the stable yard. At the guarded gate Constantine Landry flashed an owner's pass, then they were inside the perimeter that protected the expensive animals. They halted in the shade of a long barn and she looked up at him searchingly.

"I think you know too much already," she observed quietly. "But for the record, my name is Honor Mayfield."

"Yes." He led her into the barn.

Just yes. Simple and certain. As if he already knew. What was going on here, she wondered.

"Mr. Landry, I've told you my name. Now tell me what your role is in all this. You owe me that much."

"Do I?" He had halted in front of a roomy stall. A few seconds later an inquisitive equine head emerged. "Hello, Legacy. I hope you feel like running today."

"Legacy?" Honor stepped forward, staring at the beautiful bay colt.

Landry studied her reaction. "I own him."

"I see." Honor was looking at a tiny piece of her past and the impact was unsettling. "I didn't realize," she went on, "that you owned him. I saw his name on the program. He's favored to win today, isn't he?" She couldn't take her eyes off the animal.

"Slightly. This is only his second race."

"I'm sure he'll do well."

"He comes from good stock," Landry said.

"One of Stylish Legacy's descendants." Honor whispered the words aloud.

"You seem to know something about the line."

Honor sighed. "My father once owned him. He and another man, that is. Is Stylish Legacy still at stud?"

"Yes. He's eighteen now. But still producing winners." Landry stroked the warm bay neck, and Legacy nuzzled his chest. "So your father once owned Stylish Legacy?"

"It was a long time ago—" Honor broke off. "Look, Mr. Landry, I think this has gone far enough. Please tell me what your connection is with Granger."

"A bystander. Nothing more. But I'd heard rumors around the track about what was being planned for Granger today. When I saw you following him, I decided to pull you out of the action. But you *were* following him," Landry pointed out coolly.

"It's a private matter, Mr. Landry," she said.

"Will Granger's arrest take care of it?"

"With any luck, yes," she answered fervently.

"Then I think, on the whole, you really should feel grateful to me, Honor Mayfield."

Her gaze narrowed. "Are you the type to hold that sort of thing over my head?"

He looked at her, gray eyes unyielding. "I keep track of what I owe in this life, Honor. And even closer track of what's owed to me."

"I believe you, Mr. Landry." And she did. Completely. "You aren't a cop, are you?"

"No."

"And you do own Legacy?"

"Oh, yes," Landry told her. For a moment a genuine expression of emotion flickered in the gray eyes. A mixture of pride and pleasure and enthusiasm.

Scenes from the past flashed briefly through Honor's mind. She remembered a similar expression in the eyes of her father when he had talked about Stylish Legacy.

Honor drew a breath. "Well, then, I *am* grateful to you. To tell you the truth, I was not anxious to confront him, anyway." A tentative smile lightened her eyes.

Landry saw the incipient relaxation and the hint of warmth in her and congratulated himself. The first strand of the web was in place. *Come into my parlor, pretty fly.*

Actually, he admitted, she wasn't exactly pretty. But there was a compelling quality about her. The hazel eyes were expressive and serenely intelligent. Her hairstyle suited her: a smooth, casual curve that just touched her shoulders. A soft mouth and a slightly aggressive nose blended with

the wide, faintly tilted eyes, but independently, the features were not beautiful.

Still, Landry found himself searching Honor's face for whatever it was that intrigued him. Perhaps it was the hint of feminine strength in the way she carried herself. Or the shuttered, cautious warmth in her eyes. She was not a superficial woman. Pride and intelligence and gentleness hovered just beneath the surface.

The rest of her was proving interesting, too. A pair of pleated khaki pants emphasized the curve of a nicely rounded derriere. The watermelon shirt was loose but didn't conceal her small waist and pert breasts.

In bed she would be sleek and responsive, Landry decided abruptly. He wasn't certain how he knew that, but his whole body was convinced of it. The unexpected surge of a very ancient kind of awareness took him vaguely by surprise. It also put a piquant focus on his plans for Honor Mayfield.

"Honor," he murmured. "It's an interesting name."

"My father's choice," she informed him flatly.

"And do you live up to it?"

"Since we're not playing poker, I can't see that it matters."

"Is your father pleased with your efforts?"

"My father is dead, Mr. Landry."

Silence greeted her remark. Landry didn't make the usual "I'm sorry" murmur. He merely accepted the information as if he already knew the answer.

"What are you thinking, Honor?"

"That I owe you one if you really did save me from the Granger setup."

"I agree. I prefer to keep the scales balanced."

Her smile tilted into a sardonic curve. "Then you may have to write off this particular debt, Mr. Landry. I don't see how I can repay you," Honor said.

"You can watch Legacy win in the fifth," he tossed back smoothly. "I'm using the trainer's box. I'd like you to join me."

Relief flared in her as she realized he wasn't going to ask too much. "Well, if you insist," she agreed, only to be interrupted by a man's voice with a deep Southern drawl.

She turned to see a large, balding man with a paunch and an easy smile approaching. He was wearing a beige Stetson with a snakeskin band, a Western-cut shirt and flared trousers, and hand-tooled cowboy boots. He was probably in his sixties. The crinkles round his eyes when he smiled made Honor want to respond in kind.

Landry nodded toward the newcomer. "Honor, this is Ethan Bailey. He's got a couple of horses with the same trainer I use, Toby Humphrey. Ethan, meet Honor Mayfield."

"How do you do?" she said, extending her hand.

"Just fine, Miss Honor, just fine. It is Miss, isn't it?" He made a show of examining her ring finger. "Out here in California a man can't always be sure."

"Don't let Ethan put you on," Conn advised. "He's a Texan, but he spends a hell of a lot of time in California."

"Only because Toby Humphrey's the best trainer around," Ethan Bailey sighed, "and I like to be close to my horses."

"Just a good old ranch boy at heart," Conn said with an easiness that told Honor he liked the other man. "You'd never know he made his living wheeling and dealing in West Coast real estate, would you?"

"Now, Landry, old buddy, you know damn well that my calling is every bit as legitimate as your own." Ethan Bailey grinned, reaching out to pat Legacy's neck. "He's looking good today. Going to leave the rest of those clodhoppers behind."

"Maybe I'll splurge and put a couple of dollars down on him," Honor decided.

"We'll go place our bets after we've seen him saddled," Landry said.

They followed Legacy and his attendants to the stalls near the grandstands where the horses were saddled and the jockeys mounted.

Honor listened to the racing talk flowing around her and felt her pulse begin to quicken. She was barely able to contain herself as they watched Legacy and his competitors led out of the saddling area. Milton, the jockey, was tossed on board and then the restless animals headed for the tunnel to the track.

"Come on, Honor. Let's get our bets down. See you around, Bailey." Landry nodded at the other man.

"He's going to win," Honor declared as they stood in line.

"If you're so sure, why are you putting only a couple of bucks on him?" There was a brief, teasing light in Conn's eyes.

"That's as big a risk as I ever take," she retorted.

"You were taking quite a risk this afternoon by following Granger." The hint of indulgent humor disappeared.

Some of Honor's new bubbling mood evaporated. "That was different." She was saved from explaining why as her turn came at the window.

Two hundred on his own horse wasn't overly ostentatious, Honor decided as she watched Landry place his own bet at a different window. Of course, the real money for the owner would be in the winning purse.

Landry took her arm very firmly once more and led her into the stands. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the excitement on Honor's features. She was caught up in it all now, he thought with satisfaction. It had all worked out very neatly. The first strand of the web was in place. There would be no escape for Honor Mayfield.

*

LEGACY BREEZED in three lengths ahead of everything else in the field.

Swept up in the thrill of being connected to a winning racehorse, Honor was only vaguely aware of how hard she had to work to get Landry down into the winner's circle where a sweat-soaked Legacy was waiting to have his picture taken.

Everyone in the vicinity except Landry seemed eager to participate in the little ritual, and it occurred to Honor that he wasn't accustomed to being in the limelight. A man of the shadows, she thought, wondering what he'd done during his life.

Finally in position near Legacy's head, Landry looked around. Honor was waiting behind the barrier, and he held out his hand in a cool, commanding fashion. "Honor, you might as well be in this shot, too."

"Oh, no, I had nothing to do with him winning," she protested. But there was a strange insistence in his eyes. He wanted her to join him, she realized, and her instinct was to obey. She hurried forward to take her place beside him.

It was all over in a moment.

"A winner has a lot of friends," Honor observed as the strangers who had pushed their way into the photo drifted off.

"A fact of life. Losers, on the other hand, fare differently," Conn Landry said dryly.

That thought sobered her. "I wonder how many friends Granger will have, now that he's been arrested. If he was. What if the trap didn't close properly?"

He hesitated as she made for the betting windows. "Honor?"

"What is it, Conn?"

"I think you ought to tell me what's going on."

"Why?" she asked, her mood fading rapidly.

"Because you owe me an explanation," he said.

"You said I only owed you my company to watch Legacy win."

"That's just a part of what you owe me."

She saw the chill in his eyes and suppressed a shiver. Around them the crowd ebbed and flowed, but Honor felt isolated, forced to deal with a predator on his own terms.

"Just tell me what you want from me," she said tightly. The strap of her bag was damp with moisture from her palm.

"Dinner tomorrow evening?" he suggested gently.

Her eyes widened. "Dinner!"

"I'm only in town to check on Legacy's progress. I don't know anyone except Ethan and Humphrey. Is it so strange that I'd want to have dinner with an attractive woman whose father owned Legacy's sire?"

"I don't know, Conn. There's something about you that confuses me. This business with Granger... I still don't understand how you knew what was going on."

"I told you. Racetrack rumors. They're rampant."

"Apparently they didn't reach Granger's ears!"

"Probably because most people around here would just as soon see him removed from the scene. I'd still like to know how you got involved with him."

"And if I refuse to tell you?" she challenged.

"I'd still like to take you out to dinner."

But it wasn't a simple invitation. If it had been, Honor would have accepted without much hesitation.

He must have seen the flickering uncertainty in her eyes, because Conn gave her his strangely sardonic smile and pushed her lightly in the direction of the pay windows. "Where's your ticket?" he asked.

"Here." As she searched for her winning ticket, a small plastic envelope fell to the floor. Honor stifled a small sigh as Conn picked up the business-card case and read:

Mayfield Interiors
Designs for Commercial
and Residential Space

He calmly pocketed one of the cards, then handed the case back to

her. "I'll give you a call tomorrow when I find out Granger's status."

Honor shook her head once in silent acceptance of fate. Conn now knew her business address and her phone number. Yet so many questions surrounded him. How would he know Granger's status by tomorrow? Was he really in town just to watch his horse run?

The phone was ringing as Honor turned the key in the lock of her apartment door.

"Hello, Adena." Her younger sister was on the other end.

"You're back!" Adena exclaimed. She rarely spoke in mild or neutral tones. Everything was dramatic or outrageous. "What happened? Did you see Granger? Talk to him?"

"Yes and no, respectively."

"What on earth does that mean? Did you work something out with the man or not?"

"Calm down, Adena. Things didn't go exactly as planned. Granger is currently in police custody."

There was a stunned silence on the other end. "But how? When? I don't understand."

Honor gave her sister the few details she had.

"But a man like that will be out on bail in a few hours," Adena cried. "And who is this Landry person?"

"Beats me. Owns a beautiful horse, though. A colt sired by Stylish Legacy."

"Wasn't that the horse Dad used to own?"

"That's right." Adena had been only eight years old when Nicholas Mayfield was killed. She remembered the horse only because of some of the mementos left behind. Honor, at thir-

teen, had been fascinated with the idea of having a horse in the family, even though she had never seen him run. Stylish Legacy had been in only a handful of races before his two men owners had both died in a bloody scandal that had traumatized Honor. Adena had been too young to understand fully, and Mrs. Mayfield, in the midst of messy divorce proceedings, had been almost relieved when everything ended.

"Honor, this is getting messier and messier. Why couldn't you just have paid off Granger and put an end to it all?"

Honor closed her eyes, seeking patience. "Because as I was about to catch up with him, the police were waiting. You'll have to forgive me if I'm not handling this properly. I haven't had a lot of experience dealing with sharks such as Granger!"

"Meaning I have?"

"You're the one who owes him five thousand dollars!"

Adena broke into tears. As usual, Honor felt guilty.

"Forget it, Adena," she soothed. "I'm seeing Landry tomorrow and he'll tell me whether or not we still have to worry about Granger."

"Are you sure you can trust this Landry person?" Adena demanded through sobs.

"No." The initial response had been immediate. But then Honor thought about the man with the gunmetal-gray eyes. "Well, maybe," she temporized.

"What kind of an answer is that?"

"The truth is, I just don't know yet."

CONN SHOWED up at her door the following evening in an immaculately cut

gray linen jacket, with charcoal trousers that ended above hand-sewn calf-skin shoes. His crisply striped shirt and silk tie completed the quiet look of expensive power.

What still bothered Honor was her inability to identify the type of power. It wasn't the muted, ritualized power associated with the corporate world. Nor was it the flashy, heavy-handed power of the local film crowd. The strength in Landry seemed to be uniquely his own—and it was, therefore, more dangerous than the more easily recognized sources of power. It was always simpler to deal with a factor that could be labeled. But Honor didn't fear Conn. That knowledge gave her the poise to smile warmly at him.

Landry saw the confidence in her and told himself he was amused. Yet a part of him knew a sense of reluctant admiration. Beneath the bright, stylish exterior, the lady had guts.

She was wearing a yellow-gold chemise sashed low on the hips with a wide band of black. The effect was both rakish and self-confident without being outrageous. Black sandals and an ebony bracelet completed the outfit. Her hair swung in a sleek curtain around her shoulders and Landry had an almost overpowering urge to run his fingers through it. He wanted to touch her with the intimacy of a lover. She'd look good a little mussed from his touch, he decided.

"The desk clerk at my hotel recommended a little restaurant downtown," Landry said as he walked her to his silver-gray Porsche. He told her the name. "Know it?"

Honor nodded. "It's an excellent choice." She waited while he slid in beside her. "Well?" she invited cheer-

fully. "When are you going to tell me all the details?"

His promised phone call that afternoon had been brief. He'd said quite calmly that Granger was no longer a problem; but refused to tell her more at that point.

"I'll give you the full story over dinner," Landry promised now. "But Granger won't bother you or your sister again."

Her head snapped around. "How did you know about my sister's involvement in all this?"

"I'll tell you that over dinner, too." He gave her a sidelong glance. "Relax, Honor. I've taken care of everything."

Containing her curiosity until after she'd ordered her meal of broccoli salad and scallops, Honor waited for an opening.

"Tell me what they did to Granger."

Landry shrugged, reaching for his wineglass. "He's out on bail. Eventually he might wind up in jail, but probably not this time."

Honor's smile disappeared. "You said that Granger was no longer a problem. But," she went on morosely, "if he's running around loose, I'm going to have to find him."

"You're not going anywhere near that scum!"

"I haven't got much choice!" Honor shot back.

"You're right. You're going to do as I say." He studied her set face. "I know your sister owed him five thousand dollars, that it was a loan to pay off gambling debts. Since she didn't have the money, apparently she went to you for it."

"How do you know all this?" Honor demanded.

"Some of it I learned from Granger. Some of it I figured out for myself," Conn explained easily.

"You've actually talked to Granger today?"

"He headed for the racetrack as soon as they released him. He's a real racing addict."

"But I don't understand why you approached him," Honor said. "None of this is any of your business."

"It is now."

"Conn, this is ridiculous. You can't just choose to involve yourself in my personal life!"

He reached across the small table to draw a thumb along the back of her wrist. His hand was as strong-looking as the rest of him. Large, square, powerful. And the small pattern he traced on her wrist sent a tremor of awareness through her.

"I've already involved myself, Honor. I paid Granger off and told him not to go near your sister again."

Honor's gaze reflected her shock. "You gave him five thousand dollars?"

"Honor, it's all over," Conn told her. "You don't have to deal with Granger. I've handled him for you."

Confused and alarmed, Honor found herself fumbling for words of protest. "You had no right! You should have consulted me. Now I owe you the five thousand. That's assuming you're telling me the truth. Maybe this is all some sort of scam. How do I know you're any less dangerous than Granger?"

"You don't."

"Damn you and your cryptic comments!" She tossed her napkin on the table and prepared to get to her feet. The large hand that had been tantaliz-

ing the back of her wrist suddenly closed around it like a manacle.

"Sit down, Honor," Conn ordered quietly.

"Why should I?" she hissed in response.

His mouth lifted in that faint smile. "Because you owe me five thousand dollars?"

Honor went very still. Her eyes met Conn's unreadable gaze. "My check-book is at home. Take me back and I'll give you your money. The money I was going to give Granger. I get the feeling it doesn't much matter which of you I pay. You two seem to have a lot in common."

For a split second she was certain she'd gone too far. The fingers shackling her wrist became bands of steel and the cold of Conn's eyes was ice. In that instant, Honor's wariness of the man turned to fear.

And then, quite suddenly, she was free. Landry released her hand and sat back in his chair, reaching for his wineglass. He took a long swallow before he spoke. When he looked at her again, it was with his usual, remote expression.

"Congratulations, lady, you nearly managed to push me over the edge with that last crack. Did I frighten you?"

"I don't know how to take you, Conn," she said. "Yes, you frightened me for a moment. After all, I don't know much about you. And now I owe you five thousand dollars."

"Wouldn't you rather owe it to me than to Granger?"

"I don't know yet. At least I have a fair idea of where Granger fits. He's a loan shark. Once I'd paid him off he would have been out of the way. You're not so easy to classify."

"I'll take that as a compliment. A minute ago you were pointing out how much I had in common with Granger."

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

"Because you don't know anything about dealing with people like him. How did your sister get involved?"

Honor sighed, relaxing a little. "She was dating a man who gambled heavily. I guess he made it all look so easy and so much fun. He took her to Vegas and to the races and encouraged her to try her luck. At Santa Anita he introduced her to Granger who made the money so readily available that she couldn't resist. She wanted to keep up with the high-rolling crowd she was moving with and eventually got run over, instead. When she came to her senses, she dropped the boyfriend. She only borrowed three thousand," Honor said bluntly. "But the government doesn't regulate Granger's interest rates."

"Two thousand dollars in interest—yes, Granger is a step ahead of most banks. He won't be approaching your sister again, though, even if she shows up at the track."

"Because you told him to stay clear?"

"That's right."

"Why is he so willing to take orders from you?"

"Maybe I make him nervous the same way I make you nervous," Conn offered laconically.

Honor ignored her food. Leaning forward she said, "Conn, I will repay you tonight. I have the money."

"All right. If it will make you feel more comfortable."

"It will!"

He smiled faintly. "Yes, I can see that. And I do want you to feel comfortable around me, Honor."

"Do you?" she asked skeptically.

"It's a priority of mine," he assured her calmly.

HONOR HAD TO admit that by the conclusion of the meal, Conn had achieved at least a portion of his goal. His main objective, apparently, had been to protect her from having to face Granger.

Strangely enough this left her feeling more deeply in his debt than if she'd simply owed Conn the money. It was an odd bit of irony, she reflected as she gave him the key to open her front door.

"Would you like some brandy while I write out the check?" she offered politely.

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that," he murmured. "Just tell me where it is. I'll get it."

"In that red lacquered cabinet by the window."

He nodded, taking in every detail.

Honor went down the hall to her bedroom to get her checkbook. As she stepped into the Japanese-inspired room, Honor had her first sense of something being subtly wrong.

A moment later she shook her head in self-annoyance. Everything was in order. Yet she nibbled on her lower lip for a few seconds, trying to shake off the feeling that there was a new element in the room.

"You're turning into a nervous little old spinster, my girl," she told herself as she bent over the dresser and scrawled out the five-thousand-dollar check. After signing it she straight-

ened, still aware of that eerie tickle of uneasiness.

The only place in the room she hadn't checked was under the bed. She went to her knees on the white carpet and peered beneath it. Conn's blandly interested voice from the doorway sent a jolt through her.

"Well, I'll be damned. I've heard of single ladies who look under the bed before they go to sleep at night, but I didn't imagine you were one of them."

Awkward with embarrassment, Honor got to her feet and turned to pick up the check. But when she swung around with a flippant remark ready on her lips she suddenly found herself in Conn's arms. He had come up behind her as stealthily as any predator.

"Conn?"

"There's no need to go looking under your bed, Honor. I'm right here."

Standing very still in his arms, Honor watched with fascination as he lowered his mouth to hers. He was there, all right, and all thoughts of a wrong atmosphere went out of her head as he took her lips. Conn Landry felt very, very right.

It was not the sort of tentative kiss she normally expected from a new date. Instead he took her mouth as though he had been anticipating the action for a long while. What should have bothered her was that her body seemed to respond with the same feeling. It was an exciting, exhilarating sensation.

Her arms came up to wind slowly around his neck as he coaxed apart her lips. She shuddered a little as his tongue swept behind the barrier of her teeth. Conn pulled her to him with irresistible pressure, gently forcing her into total awareness of the tautness of

his thighs. And all the while he explored her mouth, drinking hungrily from the moist depths.

"Honor, honey, you taste so good," Conn murmured in a husky growl as he reluctantly freed her mouth. "Spicy, sweet and sexy. I knew you'd taste this way."

Reflexively her nails kneaded his shoulders, the coral tips sinking deeply into the gray fabric of his jacket. He groaned and raised his hands slowly along her rib cage until his thumbs rested just beneath the curve of her unconfined breasts.

"Oh, Conn."

"We're going to be good in bed together, you and I." He grazed his thumb across the crest of one breast and felt it flower to life beneath the yellow-gold silk.

"No," she whispered. "Not bed. Not yet." And, if she had an ounce of sense, she added silently, not ever.

"I won't rush you," he vowed, as she lifted her head to meet his intent gaze. The depth of his hunger startled her even as it called to her.

"I think," she began carefully, "that you'll do things exactly as you want to."

"Don't be afraid of me, Honor," he rasped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, a strange panic sizzling through her.

"Nothing. Just relax. I want you, but I can wait."

The attraction between them was so unexpectedly strong, that Honor wasn't fully prepared to handle it. Time was the key.

Slowly Landry eased himself away from her. "I'll give you a little time, Honor." He brushed his mouth lightly

across her parted lips. "But I think I'd better get out of your bedroom or I won't be able to keep my promise."

Without a word she followed him into the living room, the check in her hand. He finished his brandy while standing by the window gazing out into the darkness. When at last he turned to leave, Honor thrust the check at him.

"Feel better now that you've paid the debt?" he asked softly.

"Yes." But she didn't feel she had paid the debt, Honor decided as she said good-night to him.

It wasn't until she had turned out the living-room lights and walked back to the bedroom that the sensation of wrongness returned. What was it that bothered her?

She finally focused on the cause. The large, folding screen with its delicate Japanese artwork wasn't standing in quite the same place as when she had left the house. It didn't quite hide the television behind it.

Curious, Honor walked over to where the screen stood and examined the flattened areas of carpet where its legs had pressed it down. She knew she hadn't moved that screen in two weeks.

It was such a small thing, she told herself. But designers were trained to notice small details in a room.

Someone had been in her bedroom that night.

*

"SHE'S A NICE young lady, Conn," Ethan Bailey said. He was watching a fast filly go through her morning workout on the track.

"Your horse or Honor Mayfield?" Landry's eyes followed Bailey's expensive filly.

"It was that sweet little Honor I had in mind."

"You trying to tell me something, Ethan?" The odd little smile flickered at the edges of Landry's mouth.

Bailey shrugged. "None of my business, but, well, she doesn't seem quite your type, son."

"I agree. It's none of your business and she's probably not my type." But Conn kept his tone easy. "Look, Ethan, don't worry about her. Or me. I know what I'm doing."

"You always seem to be in control of things, I'll grant you that." Ethan grinned abruptly. "So, when do you plan on seeing her next?"

Landry glanced around at the quiet grounds. "This morning. Invited her to come watch the workouts." He glanced at his watch.

There were a lot of things bothering him that shouldn't have been. He didn't understand it. Everything had seemed so simple when he'd originally decided to track her down. The decision had been based on a gut-level feeling that there were questions to be asked and that only Honor Mayfield might have some answers. Not that he thought she would really know what had happened, but she was a Mayfield. Through her he might be able to satisfy the sense of injustice that haunted him. But she would run if she found out who he was, so he had to ensnare her firmly before he revealed himself.

And now that he'd kissed her, Landry knew the first strands of the web were securely locked in place. The response from her had been unmistakable.

"Here she is." Ethan Bailey interrupted Conn's thoughts to wave

cheerfully at Honor, who was walking toward them with a cup of coffee in her hand. "Over here, Miss Honor."

Conn turned his head to look at her, aware of a certain possessive pleasure. She looked good this morning, her hair brushed back behind one ear and held with a clip. An indigo-blue chambray shirt was belted over a pair of snug-fitting jeans.

Honor saw the hunter looking out at her from Conn Landry's eyes as she came up to the railing. It sent a tiny jolt through her, even as she acknowledged the sense of pleasure she felt in his presence.

"I was beginning to think you might not make it," Conn said quietly, his gaze moving over her.

"I wasn't sure myself." She smiled politely. "Is that one of your horses, Ethan?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bailey declared proudly.

"How long have you owned race-horses?" she asked.

"Oh, years. Gets in a man's blood."

"Is it in your blood, Conn?" she asked.

"I don't know yet. Legacy is the first horse I've owned," he told her flatly. "A lot of things besides racing can get in a man's blood."

Honor felt a prickle of alarm. "Such as?"

"A woman."

"Or hot coffee," Ethan said, as if sensing the new tension in the air. "That cup of Java sure looks good, Honor."

"I got it at a concession stand. If I'd known you didn't have any I would have picked up an extra couple of cups." She felt oddly grateful to the

older man for dispelling the uneasiness caused by Conn's words.

"What say we get ourselves some, Conn?" said Ethan.

Landry got to his feet. "I'll get it."

Honor watched him go, conscious of the smooth coordination of his stride. He was wearing jeans today and an open-throated khaki shirt. For the hundredth time, she told herself she would be wise to ease out of the relationship that was developing between them. And for the hundredth time she decided she'd wait just a little longer.

"He's an interesting man, Honor." Ethan spoke gently as he focused his field glasses on his filly.

"Have you known him long, Ethan?"

"Just since he bought Legacy."

It seemed to Honor that Ethan was about to say more and then changed his mind. "Do you know what, uh, kind of business he's in?"

"Well, I believe he's made a few substantial investments."

"In what?"

Ethan cleared his throat. "I think he mentioned Tahoe once." His face brightened. "Lots of lovely land up around Lake Tahoe."

"Lots of lovely gambling casinos, too," Honor noted dryly. "Is Conn involved in gambling, Ethan?"

"Don't you think you should be asking Landry these questions, Honor?" the older man asked uneasily.

She felt a wave of embarrassment. "I'm sorry. It's just that he's a difficult man to get to know. Doesn't talk about himself much."

"There's usually a good reason why a man doesn't want to talk about him-

self," Ethan said. "Sometimes it's best to respect that privacy."

Honor went still, aware of a subtle hint of warning in Ethan Bailey's words. Impulsively she touched his arm. "Ethan, please. Is there something I should know about Conn?"

Bailey exhaled deeply. "Honor, I like Conn Landry a lot. I'm not sure he's the sort of man a woman such as yourself should be getting mixed up with, if you take my meaning."

"I'm not sure that I do," she said quietly.

"Oh, hell, listen to me," Ethan growled. "I surely didn't mean to go and make you nervous. You're a big girl. Last thing you need is advice from an old goat like me."

Honor smiled warmly at him, knowing he wanted to be off the hook. "You're hardly an old goat, Ethan."

"Are you kidding? I'm old enough to be your father. Or Landry's, come to that."

"Don't you know that owning horses makes you fascinating to most females?" She chuckled. "Women love horses."

"Is that a fact?"

"Is what a fact?" Landry was back with the coffee.

"Honor, here, was just telling me that men who own horses are *fascinating*."

"I own one, too," Conn said blandly. "Does that mean I'm in the fascinating category?"

Honor was saved from having to answer by Bailey's beautiful filly thundering past. Immediately all attention went to the horse. Morning workouts were, after all, a serious business.

An hour later, when Honor decided she ought to be getting back to work, Conn walked her to her red Fiat. It was the first time they'd been alone that morning. As they halted beside the car, he turned her to face him, his strong hands settling on her waist.

"Did you miss me the other night after I left?"

"Actually, I had other things on my mind," she informed him flippantly.

"Another man?"

"Not quite. A folding screen."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Honor sighed. "Remember when you found me checking under the bed?"

"I remember."

"Well, I was doing that because I had a funny feeling that something wasn't quite right. A screen I use to hide my television set," she explained, feeling vaguely silly, "had been moved a few inches. Figuring out why and when kept me busy for a while."

He tilted his head to one side, studying her. "And what kind of answers did you come up with?"

"The most logical one was that my younger sister visited the apartment while we were out that evening. She has a set of keys, and she's been known to make raids on my wardrobe." But Honor shook her head, remembering the phone call she had made the next morning to Adena. "She said she hadn't, but she was so busy singing your praises for having handled Granger that I'm not sure she was paying much attention! You've got a real fan in Adena."

"On the other hand, the apartment manager might have let herself in for some reason. But she went out of town

yesterday morning and won't be back until tomorrow. And then there's the possibility that my trained designer eye isn't quite as good as I assumed. All in all, it doesn't amount to much. Nothing was missing."

"Then it wasn't a robbery attempt. But it kept you from thinking about me that night," he murmured, rubbing his thumb along the line of her jaw.

No, it hadn't kept her from thinking about him, but Honor decided it was best to let his assumption stand.

"Will six o'clock be okay for dinner tonight?" Conn asked softly, his thumb caressing her chin now.

Almost violently aware of the small, intimate touch, Honor reminded herself of her own uncertainties regarding this man. His confidence scared her.

"I'm sorry, Conn, but I have a business engagement."

The gray eyes chilled. "Cancel it, Honor."

She swallowed, a frisson of fear flickering through her. "I can't do that. I have a business to run, Conn. And now, I really do have to be going. Thank you for inviting me to the workouts. How much longer will you be in town?" She made the question casual.

He watched her slide quickly into the front seat of the Fiat, closing the door as if to be safe.

"It all depends."

Honor frowned up at him. "I thought you were only here to see Legacy run."

"I'm taking the opportunity of tying up a few loose ends," he said coolly.

She hated it when he was so damn cryptic. "Well, I certainly wouldn't

want to keep you from attending to business." Honor drove off without glancing back.

SHE HAD BEEN undecided about whether to attend the private party being held to celebrate the opening of a new restaurant that evening. The interior had been designed by a friend, however, and Honor knew Susan Mallory would appreciate having her show up.

But by ten o'clock Honor had had enough cheese to supply her calcium needs for a month. She was tired of the party and the endless chatter. It was time to leave.

She didn't notice the headlights in her rearview mirror until she was only a few blocks from her apartment. Honor didn't know when it occurred to her that the same pair of headlights seemed to have been behind her for quite some distance, but now she felt her palms grow damp on the steering wheel.

It was not unheard of for a lone woman driver to be followed then forced off the road and assaulted. Honor had read that one solution was to drive to the nearest police station. On no account should you lead the trailing car to your home.

But she was only a block away from her apartment house. Honor considered her options and decided to drive on past. She would circle the block and see if the other car followed. If it did, she would race out onto a more crowded thoroughfare and head for the nearest police station.

The other vehicle was suddenly very close behind her, its headlights on high beam. She was about to accelerate past the apartment complex when her own

lights picked out the silver-gray Porsche parked at the curb. There was a dark figure in the driver's seat.

Quite suddenly Conn Landry's presence seemed reassuring. Without pausing to think, Honor pulled in behind him, aware that the car behind was slowing, too.

She was out of the Fiat and running toward the Porsche before the tailing vehicle could edge in.

The Porsche door swung open and Landry was in front of her. Honor threw herself into his arms.

"Honor? What the hell—?"

The angry roar of a motor cut off his startled demands. A second later the black pickup accelerated past and disappeared around the corner.

"I think... I think that truck was following me," she managed. "I was going to drive on past when I saw your car. Oh, Conn, I've never been so glad to see someone in my life! What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Guess," he growled, loosening his grip on her to close his car door. "I was waiting for you, naturally. Let's go inside and I'll explain it all in great detail," he murmured, taking her arm. "But first of all tell me about that truck."

"I don't know any more than I just told you. I should report him to the cops."

"Report what? That truck didn't have a license plate." Conn propelled her lightly up the one flight of stairs to her apartment.

"Conn, about this business of you waiting for me," she began, "I'd like to know just what you thought you were going to accomplish."

He stepped around her and headed for the red lacquered cabinet that contained the brandy.

"Priority number one was to see who would be bringing you home." He poured a shot of brandy into a glass, raised it in a faint toast. "Priority number two was to make sure you didn't take him upstairs."

Honor swallowed uneasily. "As you can see, I'm really not into truck drivers." She decided to go on the offensive. "Did it occur to you that I might object to your making yourself right at home with my brandy?"

He stalked toward her. "Offering me a drink is the least you could do under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" she flared.

"I've been around when you needed me lately, haven't I?"

"No one asked you to be around, Conn."

"But you've been grateful, haven't you?" He took a large swallow of the brandy. "How was your *business* engagement, Honor? Have a good time?"

"Reasonably so," she said. "Until that truck picked me up on the way home."

He nodded. "I think it's time for a little honesty from you, Honor Mayfield," he told her.

"What do you want me to be honest about?"

"The reason you wouldn't have dinner with me tonight. Why you were avoiding me."

Honor lifted her chin with cool hauteur. "Because there's too much I don't know about you. You frighten me a little, Conn, and I think you realize it."

The gray eyes flickered. "Yes."

"Then why put me through the third degree about this evening?" she challenged. "Unless you really want to scare me for some reason."

She had the oddest feeling that he was forced to stop and think about the answer to that question.

"You have a point, Honor," Conn said finally. "I have no right to dictate how you spend your nights, do I?"

"No," she got out in a thin whisper.

"The problem is that I'd like that right," he continued. "I'd like you to know that I'll be there when things turn nasty. I'd like you to trust me, Honor."

There was an urgency in his words that forced her to accept their sincerity. In that moment she wasn't even sure Conn himself realized the intensity with which he was speaking. Honor watched him as he moved toward her.

"Conn, there's so much we don't know about each other."

He set down the brandy glass and touched the base of her throat. The desire in his eyes was an endless gray sea.

"I agree. But I think tonight would be a good time to discover some basic truths."

Whatever her answer would have been, it was swallowed up in the depths of his kiss.

Her mouth was soft and warm. He was holding a woman who wanted him, even if she wasn't sure she ought to want him. Sensing her desire, his own soared.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he breathed as he freed her mouth to taste the warm sweetness at her throat. "Just let go. Just let it happen."

"Conn," she whispered shakily, "I wanted time. I'm not sure of anything right now."

He wrapped his fingers lightly around the nape of her neck and used his thumbs to lift her chin so that she had to meet his eyes. Her gaze was half-dragged with a combination of desire and wariness.

"Conn, we should talk..." Her voice trailed off beneath his mouth.

"In the morning," he promised when he released her lips. "Please trust me tonight, Honor."

"Can I trust you, Conn Landry?"

He moved abruptly, lifting her up into his arms. "Yes, you can trust me!" The vow was ground out with a force that amazed him, and she seemed to accept the rough promise.

Conn left the lights off in her bedroom as he carried her through the door. The pale glow from the hall provided all the illumination he needed. Standing her carefully on her feet he fumbled for the fastenings of her dress. Finally the silky garment gave way and fell into a frothy heap around her feet.

"Honor," he murmured, drawing his hands lightly around her shoulders and down to the curve of her breasts. He touched the lacy edge of her bra, sliding one finger underneath to find the peaking tip of her nipple. "Honor, I want you so much."

She said his name into his shoulder, her nails sinking into the fabric of his shirt. "You make it impossible for me to think tonight. Why is it like this with you, Conn?"

He unsnapped the front hook of her bra, and his palms slipped over her breasts. "I don't know," he heard himself say. "I could ask you the same

question. Why do I feel like this with you? I never meant—”

“Never meant what?” She raised her head.

“Never mind. Don’t think about anything other than tonight, sweetheart. Heaven knows you’re all I can think about at the moment.” He framed her face with his hands and kissed her, glorying in her vibrant response. “Take off my shirt. Let me feel your hands on my body,” he ordered thickly.

Her fingers shook faintly as she struggled with the buttons of his shirt. But in a moment she had it off and then she tugged awkwardly at his leather belt buckle.

Trying not to hurry, but knowing he could barely contain his need, Conn finished undressing her. He slid his hands down the length of her, dragging off the satiny underpants and the gossamer panty hose. When she pushed at his snug-fitting jeans, he stepped back and tugged at them himself.

A moment later his Jockey shorts fell to his feet and he heard Honor’s sharp intake of breath as she saw the evidence of his rising desire.

“I told you I wanted you, sweetheart. Did you doubt me?” he said in a husky voice, aware that he needed some sign of her acceptance of him as a lover. “Are you still afraid of me?”

She shook her head, stepping close so that she could feel his excitement pressing against the smooth skin of her stomach. She cupped him gently with her hands and Conn thought he would lose all control.

“I want you, Conn.” There was a mesmerizing sincerity in her throaty

voice. “I don’t understand all of my feelings, but I know I want you.”

“Honor, I’ll make it good for you, I swear it. And you couldn’t be anything but perfect for me.” He lowered his head and parted her lips with his mouth, forcing his tongue deep inside. Then he shaped her buttocks in his hands, letting his fingers graze her flesh. When he heard her gasp of anticipation he stroked around to the front of her body and touched her intimately between her thighs.

Honor moaned, and his own pulse beat heavily as he felt the dampening heat of her. Leaning down he yanked back the quilt on her bed and then lifted Honor and settled her gently into the depths of the bedclothes.

She fell back sensuously, her hair fanning out on the pillow, hazel eyes gleaming up at him. “Have you hypnotized me, Conn Landry? It’s that or I must be slightly out of my head tonight.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling disoriented,” he muttered as he came down beside her. “This is just the way I want you, warm and welcoming and all mine.”

He buried his mouth against the base of her throat, stroking his palm down her stomach to the treasures below. She whispered his name in aching desire and he felt the readiness in her. When she arched her hips against him in silent demand he told himself he’d make her wait a little longer. He wanted her so hot and passionate that she would not be able to imagine living the rest of the night without having him inside her.

“Tell me about it, Honor, honey. Tell me how much you want me.” He made the demands in a husky tone in

between stringing kisses across her breasts.

"So much, Conn, I want you so very much. I've never felt like this." She lifted her hips again, grasping his shoulders to urge him to her.

He pushed one knee between her legs and felt her open immediately for him. The invitation jerked a rough cry of passion from him and he knew he couldn't wait any longer. Conn settled himself between her thighs, aware of her fiery need teasing him.

"Take me inside, sweetheart. I have to be inside you or I'll go crazy!" He moved his hand down to touch the folds of exquisitely sensitive feminine flesh, assuring himself once again that she was ready. She murmured in passionate response.

"Please, Conn. Please, now!"

He couldn't hold back any longer. Catching her shoulders, he thrust deeply, embedding himself in her pulsating, clinging warmth. He felt the shudder go through her as her body adjusted to the masculine invasion. Instantly he stopped.

"Honor?"

She didn't open her eyes but her legs moved slowly to wrap his lean hips. He felt her nails in his back and the small pain sent another ripple of excitement through him.

"Love me, Conn. Please make love to me."

"Honor, I couldn't do anything else!" He began to move within her, feeling her body growing increasingly tense around him.

"Conn, Conn!"

He sensed the uncertainty in the breathless way she called his name and dimly realized she wasn't quite sure of what was happening to her body.

"Let go, sweetheart," he rasped against her breast. "Just let go. I'll catch you."

She cried out as the heightening tension unleashed itself in one shattering conclusion. Conn lifted his head to cover her mouth, drinking the passionate sounds she made far back in her throat, and then he felt his body arching heavily as it sought its own release.

For long, timeless seconds he rode the storm with the woman in his arms, holding on to her more tightly than he'd ever held on to anything or anyone in his life.

Honor came slowly out of the hazy world into which she had drifted. She was aware of Conn's heavy frame sprawled along hers, his thigh chaining her leg. She was still wrapped securely in his arms, and the knowledge filled her with deep pleasure. Languidly she toyed with the silver-shot blackness of his hair, studying the dark lashes that were the only hint of softness in his face. Then he opened his eyes.

"No more nights like tonight," he said bluntly.

"No? You didn't enjoy tonight?" she teased lightly.

Conn shook his head once, impatiently, then lifted himself off her body with obvious reluctance. "I meant no more nights where I sit in front of your apartment." He cradled her possessively in the crook of his arm.

"How many more nights will there be to worry about, Conn? Soon you'll be going back to Tahoe."

The wave of unhappiness that washed over her at her own words occupied her until she noticed that Conn had gone dangerously still.

"Who told you about Tahoe?" he asked.

Honor stirred uneasily. "Ethan said something about your having business interests there."

"That's all I have there. I don't make my home in Tahoe," he said.

"I see." Honor wasn't certain what to say next. Clearly he didn't want to talk about Tahoe. "It's all right, Conn. I didn't mean to pry. And you don't owe me any promises or commitments. I understand that."

The information didn't seem to please him. "The hell I don't," he growled. "Honor, you and I are bound together now. You just gave yourself to me."

"Do you realize what you're saying, Conn?" she asked carefully.

"I know exactly what I'm saying," he told her. "I couldn't walk away from what we've started. And I won't let you walk, either."

She smiled. "Do I look as though I'm trying to get away?"

"You tried to avoid me this evening," he pointed out.

She looked up at him with the soft eyes of a woman who knows she's falling in love. "That was earlier. This is now," she explained.

"You're not frightened of me any longer?"

"I don't think I was ever really scared, just wary."

"And you're not still wary?" he pressed.

"Should I be?" she countered lightly.

"No," he rasped, lowering his mouth once more to hers. "There's no need any longer."

A part of her wanted to ask what that meant, but he was already restok-

ing the fires it seemed only he could ignite. Honor felt the throbbing intensity in him and had no wish to resist.

She awoke early the next morning with the feeling that her whole life had changed. Conn had made love to her last night in the most satisfying way possible. Admittedly her experience was limited, but Honor instinctively knew that the kind of passion she had experienced could not be a common thing.

Stepping into the shower, she let her pleasantly sore body soak beneath the hot spray. Every time she moved today she was going to be reminded of Conn's elemental style of lovemaking, she thought wryly.

She heard the bathroom door open and close. A moment later Conn appeared on the other side of the glass shower door, smiling lazily. He opened the door and stepped inside, reaching for her. "Mmm," he murmured through a long, luxurious kiss, "you taste good in the morning."

"Considering the amount of goat cheese I sampled last night, that's saying something." She grinned, winding her arms around his neck.

"I consider it a part of the earthy side of your nature." He slicked his hands down her wet body to her hips, squeezing gently.

"I'm a Southern Californian. I'm not supposed to have an earthy side to my nature," she complained.

"Then you're a failure as a Southern Californian. But I knew that the moment I met you."

She tilted her head. "You did?"

"The last thing you are is superficial, Honor. I could list a lot of reasons why I know you aren't the kind who flits along on the surface of life."

"But?" she prompted.

"But all my glowing compliments would probably go to your head."

"Beast. I'd rather hear them than listen to you yelling at me for daring to have another engagement last night."

"I didn't yell at you." He stuck his head under the full force of the water, eyes closed.

"Conn? It works both ways, you know."

He opened his eyes to look at her.

"Both ways?"

"I won't be involved in a one-sided relationship," she said. "I have to know that you'll live by the same rules you're imposing on me."

"You think I won't?"

Honor studied him for a moment longer, thinking over what she knew of this man. She longed to trust him implicitly. "I think you will." She finally smiled.

Conn moved, wrapping her close against his warm, wet chest. "Does that mean you trust me, finally?"

Her fingers splayed through the damp, curling hair that covered him in a sexy pelt. "Yes."

"Thank you, Honor. I'm glad," he said simply.

So am I, she thought, because I'm in love with you.

An hour later Honor was slicing papaya and sprinkling it with lime while Conn made coffee. The doorbell chimed just as she was putting the fresh fruit on the table. Honor went to answer it.

"Adena!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Just dropped by on my way to work to see if I could borrow that great chunky leather belt you bought the other day."

With her usual impulsive approach, Adena whipped around the door and came to a halt, staring at Conn, who stared back at the flashy little gamine in front of him.

Adena's bright blond hair was cut in an eye-catching wedge that framed her outrageously made-up hazel eyes. She wore knee-high cavalry boots, tight-fitting red pants and a boxy, loosely woven top.

"Good grief," Adena said, "who are you? Honor *never* has men stay for breakfast."

"I insisted, I'm afraid. You're Adena?"

"That's right." Adena swung around with a grin.

"This is Constantine Landry," Honor said very firmly. "I believe I mentioned him," she continued.

"Landry! The guy who handled Granger for me. Of course." Adena almost pounced on a somewhat startled Conn. "You're an absolute jewel, you know." She kissed him noisily. "Can't tell you how much I appreciate your help. Granger gives me the creeps." Adena shivered theatrically as she helped herself to coffee and sat down.

"Then I trust you will stay away from him and the others like him in the future. I don't expect to have to handle that kind of situation again, and if I find out you've tried to coerce Honor into doing it for you, I will be very displeased," Conn said flatly as he picked up the coffee pot and set it down on the table.

"Golly, I feel as if I'm sitting in the middle of a scene from 'Father Knows Best.' Doesn't it strike you that it's too nice a morning for lectures?" Adena complained.

"What kind of a morning was it the day you first started borrowing from Granger?" Conn calmly ate his papaya, oblivious to Honor's frowning glance.

"I get the point," Adena said disgustedly, shooting to her feet with lively grace. "If you'll excuse me I think I'll be on my way. How about that belt, Honor? Okay if I take it?"

"Help yourself," Honor agreed.

Adena reappeared a moment later carrying the prized belt. "My goodness, you two certainly did something energetic on that bed. Well, see you guys later." She was gone before Conn or Honor could respond.

For a moment, silence hung over the table. Then Conn said, "I can see that she's been something of a handful for you. Your mother...?"

"My mother remarried a few years ago and moved to the East Coast. Adena wanted to stay out here with me. She was only eight when Dad was killed." Honor tried to put a lot of finality into the sentence.

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen. Conn, I don't really like to talk about the past."

"You can't pretend it doesn't exist."

"I don't," she said coolly. "I just prefer not to discuss it. The circumstances surrounding my father's death were, well, traumatic for all of us."

"What happened, Honor? I want to know everything about you."

Honor closed her eyes. "Believe me, you don't want to know about that aspect of my life."

"Yes, I do," he countered.

She slammed her cup into the saucer, annoyed with his insistence. "All right, I'll tell you. My father was

killed, along with his partner, while running an illegal shipment of guns into the Middle East. Does that answer your question? The papers called him a traitor and a criminal. The implication was that he got what he deserved."

"Along with his partner," Conn said slowly.

Honor said bitterly, "I've always thought that the real criminal probably was his partner. I'll bet my father caught him with the shipment and he pulled a gun. In the end they both died." Honor swallowed some of her anger. "They were supposed to be respectable oil executives." She sighed.

Conn regarded her tense face. "You've always assumed that your father's partner was the guilty one?"

"No one will ever know. The authorities said they were both in on the gunrunning." Honor shook her head, striving to return to normal. "And I guess it no longer really matters, does it? It was all a long time ago."

"Some people aren't satisfied until they've tied up all the loose ends," Conn Landry said softly.

"You're one of those people, aren't you?" she hazarded. "The kind who ties up loose ends. You like things balanced."

"Yes."

Honor absorbed the sound of the single affirmative word. Constantine Landry was being utterly truthful, she decided. He wasn't telling her anything she hadn't already guessed, but he had now reinforced the sensation she had of danger hovering like an aura around him. Yet there was a hunger in her to follow the dangerous path past Conn Landry's emotional barriers.

Honor would take the risks inherent in becoming involved with Constantine Landry. She had no real choice.

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IDLY HONOR pushed around the little cutouts that represented various sizes and shapes of office furniture, but it was hard to keep her mind on the floor plan in front of her. All she could think about was the fragile new relationship she had begun with Constantine Landry.

It shouldn't be love, not so soon and not with so many unanswered questions, but she was very much afraid that it was. She'd never felt so vulnerable in her life. Only love left a woman of twenty-eight feeling so precariously poised on the brink. Why was she fighting it? she wondered.

Honor glanced up from her desk as the front door opened. Ethan Bailey smiled genially as he stepped inside. He glanced around with interest.

"This is right nice," he observed, touching the beige leather of a chair. "Is that real marble?" He indicated her desktop.

"Absolutely." She smiled, motioning him to sit down. "Nothing like a sheet of black marble to impress potential clients. What can I do for you, Ethan? I would think you'd be out at Santa Anita."

"Already watched the morning workouts," he said easily. "Conn was there, too."

She nodded composedly. "Yes, he said he wanted to discuss Legacy's future with Toby Humphrey."

"He did. He also talked a bit about Legacy's past."

Honor's gaze was quizzical. "Is something wrong, Ethan?" she finally asked gently.

The older man shifted uncomfortably. "To tell you the truth, I don't rightly know. But I wonder if I could speak quite frankly."

"Of course."

"What I'm going to say is probably none of my business. But I feel obliged to say it, anyway. You're such a nice young lady. I've come to think of you as a friend."

A trickle of warning went down Honor's spine. "What's wrong, Ethan?"

He sighed. "Conn said this morning that your father had once owned Legacy's sire, Stylish Legacy."

"That's right."

Ethan's gaze was very level. "Your father's full name would have been Nick Mayfield?"

The warning sensation was stronger now. "Did you know him, Ethan?"

"Not well. But I was certainly aware of Stylish Legacy. He was the most promising colt on the West Coast fifteen years ago. And he's lived up to that promise. Legacy cost Conn a fair-size fortune."

"Please get to the point, Ethan," Honor said tensely. "It's obvious you're trying to tell me something."

He inhaled deeply. "Honor, you probably know your dad had a partner."

"I'm aware of it."

"His name was Richard Stoner," Ethan said flatly.

"So? I don't understand where all this is leading."

"All right. Landry is Conn's middle name. He's used it for years because he was working overseas for a lot of fancy

corporations that might have been nervous about dealing with Richard Stoner's son."

The pencil in Honor's hand snapped in two. She stared down at the broken halves, then raised her head to meet Ethan's unhappy expression. "Conn Landry is the son of my father's partner?" she whispered. "But why didn't he tell me?"

Ethan leaned forward anxiously. "Honor, you were only a kid when your father and Stoner killed each other during that quarrel. Conn was twenty-three, just out of college. The scandal hit him pretty hard, I gather. It's not something he talks about, but I heard rumors around the track when the story hit the papers. They said—" Ethan halted abruptly. "They said Conn was convinced your father had betrayed his. People said he swore vengeance on your family fifteen years ago."

"Vengeance!" A man who liked to tie up loose ends. The words went through her head in staccato fashion.

Ethan was silent for a moment. "When Landry bought Legacy and his horse and mine wound up in Humphrey's training stables, somebody remembered that Stoner's son used the name Landry. When you showed up, the coincidence of the whole thing worried me. I started remembering all those stories about how he'd vowed to make your family pay for what your father did to his."

"My father didn't do anything to Richard Stoner!" Honor hissed, the old anger welling higher. "I always thought there was a damn good chance that Stoner was the one smuggling weapons and that my father had the bad luck to discover him doing it."

Ethan held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Honor, I just couldn't stand by and not tell you who Landry really was. You have to make your own decision about the man, but I thought you ought to know that his interest in you might be based on something besides..."

"You mean he might have some motivation other than love at first sight," Honor observed coolly.

Ethan shrugged. "I don't know. He doesn't realize I know who he is. I suppose he didn't think I'd make any connection. Or maybe he wouldn't care if I did."

"You've never told him you know he's Richard Stoner's son?" she asked in amazement.

Ethan's mouth firmed. "You have to understand how it is in the racing world, Honor," he said gently. "For the most part a man's past is his own business. People might gossip about it, but that's as far as it goes. I don't generally pry into matters that don't concern me."

Poor Ethan, Honor thought distractedly. She could see he was already regretting his involvement.

Her own mood was precarious, she realized. Honor could see herself as a small female animal that had been neatly driven into a strange sort of trap. What was Conn Landry Stoner planning on doing next? she wondered in frozen pain. What was the point of the trap?

"I suppose I ought to thank you for telling me all this," she managed distantly.

"Not hardly!" Ethan exploded in self-disgust. "If I were you, I'd kick me out of this office!"

"I know you meant well, Ethan."

"Meant well! Hell, Landry's a friend of mine. I felt torn apart, not knowing which way my duty lay. But what if I've got this all botched up? What if it's a genuine coincidence?"

"Do you believe that, Ethan?" she asked soberly.

"I might. If it weren't for one thing," said Ethan.

She frowned. "What's that?"

"That business about Granger and a police trap."

"What about it?"

"Well, I hadn't heard any rumors about that ambush. So I checked with some folks I know. Granger wasn't arrested that day, Honor. He wasn't set free on bail, either. Just been running around loose as usual."

TWO HOURS AFTER Ethan Bailey had left her office, Honor finally accepted the fact that she wasn't going to get any productive work done that day. How did one confront the Conn Landrys of this world and demand explanations, she asked herself as she sat down at a table in an outdoor café. She thought of the beach and of the cottage her father had bequeathed to her. She rarely used the house, but quite suddenly she saw it as an escape. Honor had a strong need to lick some very raw wounds and she wanted to do so in private.

She had known from the beginning that Conn was dangerous. But she'd had no way of knowing that he had a score to settle with her family.

Honor didn't finish her sandwich. She paid for it and walked to the parking lot where her Fiat waited. Slowly she drove home, her mind in a turmoil.

The only thing she could do was confront Conn. She had to hear the truth from him. Nothing else was going to kill the love that had begun to grow within her.

Honor was in a pair of old jeans and an emerald-green dolman-sleeved top when she went to answer the door at six o'clock. She had pulled her hair back into a knot. Conn took one look at her unsmiling face and stepped inside.

"I take it we're staying in this evening?" he said.

"I think we need to talk, Conn." Honor was remotely pleased that her voice was calm.

He sank into a chair. "Something wrong, Honor?"

She walked to the window to stare into the darkness. "That's what I want to ask you, Conn."

"You're the one who's being cryptic now."

She heard the hard-edged caution in him.

"You never bothered to mention that your last name was Stoner," she said quietly.

There was a second of dead silence behind her.

"Stoner never has been my last name."

Startled, Honor spun around. "You're not Richard Stoner's son?"

"I'm his son."

Hope died. "I see."

"In all the ways that count, Richard Stoner was my father. I was twelve years old when my mother married him. My biological father was killed when I was a baby. There was never a formal adoption, but I grew up thinking Richard Stoner was the kind of man I wanted to become."

Honor stared at the granite-hard expression on the face of the man she loved. "You knew who I was before you met me?"

He watched her through narrowed eyes. "I've known for several months."

She turned back to the window.

"What did you plan to accomplish, Conn?" she asked steadily.

He came up out of the chair to stand only inches behind her. "I didn't know what I wanted from you. Only that there was something to be settled between my family and yours."

"You wanted revenge," she whispered.

"The official investigation concluded there had been a quarrel between partners, that Nick Mayfield had planned to kill my father and finalize the sale of the guns himself. Something went wrong."

"In the ensuing fight, they killed each other," Honor said, "and you're convinced my father betrayed yours."

"I've had no reason to think otherwise for fifteen years," Conn said levelly. "I knew Richard Stoner well. He wouldn't have been involved in gun-running."

"My God," she breathed. "Fifteen years of plotting your revenge. It must have eaten away your soul."

His fingers touched her shoulder. Honor froze.

"It wasn't like that, Honor. Are you willing to listen to me tonight?"

"I don't have much choice."

"No," he agreed grimly, "you don't. You're the one who brought up the subject."

She wished he would take his hand off her shoulder. His touch made her want to turn around, bury her face

against his chest and cry out all the anger and pain.

His fingers tightened dangerously, and she sensed the tension in him. "I haven't been hidden away in some dark hole plotting vengeance for fifteen years, for heaven's sake. I've been working overseas. I was busy and always on the move. I was a sort of troubleshooter, and my specialty was security problems.

"When I decided to resign and return to the States two years ago, a part of me started thinking about the unfinished business between my family and yours. I decided to find out what had happened to Stylish Legacy. The next thing I knew I was buying one of the colts. It seemed the right thing to do, but it was a mistake in some ways."

"Because every time you looked at Legacy you thought of his sire and of our fathers," Honor guessed.

"Honor, I have a thing about betrayal. Perhaps I've seen too much of it in my line of work. Whatever the reason, once I'd bought Legacy, my need to settle the past became more and more important. I told myself I would at least find out what had happened to Nick Mayfield's kids. It wasn't hard to track you down. One thing led to another. For the past three months I've known where you lived, where you worked, whom you dated and that you occasionally went to the track."

"You had me followed!" She was appalled.

"Only for a week. Long enough to find out the critical details. Then I took over the job myself."

"You must hate me, Conn Landry," she whispered.

"No, damn it, I don't hate you! That's what I'm trying to explain," he snapped furiously. "After I had discovered the whereabouts of Mayfield's elder daughter I had to find out what she was like."

"Why?" she cried.

"Maybe I just wanted to see if she'd turned out like her father. I don't know why exactly. You were another link, like Legacy. I only knew that it was important."

"Because there was unfinished business to settle," she finished savagely. "Why the trap, Conn? From the moment I met you, you've been boxing me into some kind of cage. I still don't understand what you want from me," she said stonily. "You seduced me. Believe me, that's about all I have to give. There's a little money, I suppose—"

"I don't want your money, damn it!"

"My father left me a beach cottage up the coast," Honor went on doggedly. "It's worth something. You've met Adena. You must realize there's not much to be had from her."

"Will you shut up? You're not even trying to understand!" He released her, removing his hand so quickly she wondered if he'd been afraid of losing control and hurting her.

She caught her breath. "Is this the part where you tell me you've fallen madly in love? That you've given up all notion of revenge? That the past doesn't matter?"

The gray eyes were colder than the landscape of the moon. "Look, Honor, I'm trying to be honest with you."

"That's a change."

"You little—" He took a step forward and halted abruptly, visibly restraining himself. "Honor, I don't know much about love. It's an undefined, vague concept that usually doesn't sustain itself for long from what I've seen. But my feelings about you are no longer ambivalent. I want you. And I have some first-hand evidence that you want me. I'm prepared to start over on that basis."

"Start over! Are you out of your mind?"

His face was a set mask. "I've been asking myself that question. No, I'm not out of my mind," he said wryly. "There are bonds between us, Honor, and I suspect you realize that as much as I do. Whatever the initial cause and effect, the result exists. You and I are together now."

"I would never have guessed you believed in fate!" she stormed.

He shrugged. "Maybe I've spent too much of my life in places where people believe in such things."

"Well, I'm from Southern California," Honor flung back fiercely, "and here we shape our own future. I was a fool to get involved with you, Conn Landry. Please get out of my apartment. Now!"

"You know it isn't going to end this simply. We'll talk this over when you've calmed down. There is too much between us." His mouth lifted in the faint cynical smile. "Murder and betrayal between our fathers, passion and *obligation* between us. Don't forget. You owe me, honey. We're tangled up together in this now."

He turned and walked out before Honor could answer.

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HE WOULD give her twenty-four hours, Conn decided. Hell, he needed the time just as much as she did. Conn piloted the Porsche to his hotel, then stalked inside to the English-pub-style bar. It wasn't until he ordered the Scotch that he realized just how much of his tightly controlled sense of frustration and anger must be visible. The bartender acted as though he were serving a shark.

Several blocks away from the hotel, Honor locked her door and picked up her suitcase. She'd left a message for Adena on her sister's answering machine.

It was going to be a long drive, but she would have plenty of time to think en route. Honor didn't notice the black pickup behind her until she took the on-ramp of the freeway. When a casual glance in her rearview mirror picked it up, Honor's stomach twisted into a knot of fear.

You can't be sure it's the same truck, she told herself. But she couldn't see any license plate. The black pickup that had followed her home hadn't had plates. It was dark now, however, and she couldn't be certain of the image in her mirror.

The potential perils of freeway driving claimed her attention for the next several miles as the lanes became crowded. The freeways around Los Angeles were packed at this hour on Friday evenings. She lost sight of the pickup completely and told herself it had been nothing to worry about. Still, she fled up Highway 101 as if she were being chased by demons.

CONN HAD good reason to remember his decision to drink his dinner when the phone rang shrilly at seven-thirty the next morning.

"Hell," he groaned, fumbling for the receiver, "I didn't leave a wake-up call."

It was Ethan. "Sorry to wake you. I'm at Santa Anita. Came to watch the workouts." There was a pause.

"I plan to skip them this morning," Conn muttered.

"Yeah. Listen, Conn, I'm not calling about that. But I think you ought to get out here. It has to do with Legacy."

"Legacy? What's wrong with him? Where's Humphrey?"

"Legacy's all right, Conn. But this has something to do with him . . . and this is a public phone."

Through the pain in his temples, Conn heard the man's concern. "Okay, okay. I'll be right out."

Ethan Bailey met him just outside the guard gate.

"You'd better tell me the worst and get it over with," Conn said, sighing.

"Let's go out to my car," Ethan suggested gently.

"What the hell are you being so mysterious about this morning? You look worse than you did when that real estate deal in Orange County went sour," Conn grumbled.

"That was business. This is personal," Ethan told him. He paused beside his big white Mercedes. "Maybe too personal." He wrenched open the door and pulled out a burlap bundle. "I wanted you to see this before I did anything too dramatic."

"What is it?" Conn frowned.

"I found these inside Legacy's stall this morning." Ethan unwound the

burlap to reveal two apples. "Conn, someone put these in Legacy's feed while he was on his morning workout. Look at this." One of the apples had been cored.

Conn examined it, then took a small star-shaped metal object from his pocket. He neatly sliced the apple in two, cleaned the star on his jeans and dropped it back into his pocket. "Well, what do you know?" he said. A large capsule had been hidden in the apple.

Ethan stared at the powder-filled capsule, then steeled himself to deliver the rest of his news. "When I found those apples this morning, I asked the guard if there'd been a lot of strangers coming into the stable area. He said there had been only one person in on a visitor's pass. A woman with light-brown hair who wore a pair of yellow pants and a blue Windbreaker. She didn't stay long."

Conn didn't move for a timeless instant, images of Honor's bright-brown hair and vivid wardrobe flashing into his aching head. Honor, who saw herself as a woman who had been used. Like father, like daughter? "No," he whispered under his breath.

"You all right, Conn?" Ethan squinted at him.

"I'll live." Maybe. He suddenly wasn't sure.

Ethan nodded. "When the guard said something about a woman, well, I..." He didn't finish the sentence.

"You knew who the description fit."

"Conn, this is just about the most goddamned miserable mess I've ever seen. What did you do to that little lady to make her want to do something like this?"

Conn glanced down at the bundle in his hand. "Made her mad, I guess."

He turned and started toward his car. "But that's nothing compared to what she just did to me."

As he slammed the Porsche to a halt in front of Honor's apartment complex, he was having to fight for self-control.

Conn took the stairs two at a time, halting at Honor's front door. He pounded on it brutally.

After several minutes of pounding and the frowning inquiries of a couple of neighbors, Conn realized his quarry had fled.

"Look, mister," a man damp from jogging said, "I just came up through the garage. Her car isn't down there. Take my word for it. She's gone for the weekend."

Conn had Adena's address and ten minutes later he was pounding on her door. This time he got an answer.

"Good heavens, it's only eight-thirty and it's Saturday. If you're here to give me another lecture about Granger, kindly skip it. I have an excellent memory." Adena glared at her visitor, clutching at her kimono-style bathrobe.

"I'm looking for your sister," he spat out.

"Honor?" Adena blinked vaguely. "How should I know where she is?"

"She's not at her apartment. I have to find her."

"Why?" There was a sudden, wary concern in her voice.

Conn forced himself to contain his fury. "We argued last night. She's apparently left town. I'm trying to locate her."

"Ah," Adena said, her face clearing. "You want to do a little groveling, is that it?"

Conn stared at her. "I hadn't thought of it quite that way."

"Well, don't worry. Honor is a very forgiving, tolerant soul. Let me see if she left any messages. She usually tells me when she's leaving town." Stifling a yawn, Adena padded into the kitchen and switched on the answering machine.

Conn listened to two calls from young men begging Adena to go to the same punk rock concert before Honor's tense voice was heard.

"Adena? I'm going out of town for a couple of days. Thought I'd get some use out of Dad's cottage. Please don't let anyone know where I am. I need some time alone."

"Uh-oh." Adena grinned wryly as she switched off the machine. "Looks like I should have vetted that call. Are you going to the cottage?"

"I'll need directions."

"Sure." Quickly Adena rattled them off and then she eyed her visitor keenly. "Goodbye, Conn. Don't forget to practice your groveling technique while you're driving. I think it needs work."

WHEN SHE ARRIVED at the cottage late the previous evening, Honor had experienced the sense of unease and distant, unhappy resentment that she always felt when she opened the door of the beachfront house.

Saturday morning she rose after a restless night's sleep and prepared breakfast. As she ate she glanced around the walls, absently noting the framed photos of Stylish Legacy in various winner's circles. Honor rarely studied the pictures closely. It hurt to see the face of her father smiling back at the world as if the future looked

good to him. But maybe a walk on the beach this morning would lighten her mood.

Honor changed into a pair of jeans, tennis shoes, and a peach-colored velour top. It was turning chilly. By the evening the coastal fog would no doubt be rolling in and blanketing this stretch of beach.

Giving up on the walking therapy after forty minutes or so, Honor turned reluctantly back toward the house. It stood alone on the bluff overlooking the beach. There were a couple of other cottages nearby but they were both empty at this time of year. Although the place depressed her, she couldn't bring herself to get rid of it. It was as if too many questions remained unanswered about the past.

She was pondering the vagaries of her own nature when she heard the roar of the Porsche engine as the sleek vehicle pulled into the driveway.

Conn Landry had come after her.

In stunned silence she watched him stride to the cottage. She was several feet away, standing in the shadow of the house, but she could see the implacable expression on his harsh face. Honor let him raise his hand to pound on the door before she stepped around the corner.

"Hello, Conn. Still looking for your revenge?"

He spun around to face her. "Lady, you could teach me a few things about revenge," he retorted softly. "You surprised me, do you know that? I would never have guessed you'd try to get at me through the horse."

Honor felt a jolt of fear. "What are you talking about?"

"Your little scheme to poison Legacy."

"Are you out of your mind?" she gasped.

"That possibility exists. I've been asking myself the same question for the past couple of hours. I must have been crazy to think you were a different breed from your father."

"Don't bring my father into this!" she flared.

"Why not? It all started with him. But it's going to end here, Honor Mayfield. Fifteen years ago, there was no one who could be made to pay for what had happened. This time it's different. This time I've got my hands on you."

Honor turned and ran, heading for the beach because there was nowhere else to go. Honor knew he was right behind her. She also knew that fleeing was hopeless. She had yearned to get past the barriers of Conn's self-control but she had never dreamed of doing it this way.

He didn't call out to her or order her to stop. Conn simply bore down on her with the silent intensity of a large hunting cat, and as she reached the water's edge, Honor felt Conn's hand on her waist.

"No!" she shrieked. "Let me go, damn you!"

"Did you think you could run from me? There's no place on this planet you could hide." He pulled her against his body, trying to control her struggles.

But Honor was fighting for her life. She lashed at him with her nails, kicked at him, and tried to use her teeth on his arm.

"You little—" Conn's words were muffled as both victim and pursuer sprawled on the cold, wet packed sand. "I'll teach you to betray me," Conn

rasped, throwing his thigh heavily across her thrashing legs.

"I didn't betray you!" The words were torn from her as she pushed uselessly at his descending weight.

"Then why hide? Tell me why you ran, Honor."

"I'm not hiding. I just wanted to get away from the man who was using me for his own warped notions of revenge. Is that so strange? Damn you, Conn Landry, who gave you the right to inflict your warped sense of justice on me?"

"I wasn't inflicting any punishment on you," he exploded. "I hadn't done a thing except take you to bed, come in handy when you were being followed, and rescue your sister, remember? I never hurt you!"

"You tracked me down just so you could 'tie up loose ends,'" she hissed. "You wanted to settle old scores. You admitted it! Taking me to bed was part of your twisted idea of getting even. And now you have the nerve to accuse me of betraying you!"

"You tried to poison Legacy!"

She gasped in amazement and then her eyes slitted in fury. "Never. I would never hurt your horse. Or any other horse, for that matter! Is that how little trust you have in me, Landry?"

"Why did you try to feed those apples to Legacy this morning?" he almost shouted.

Honor stilled as she heard his agonized plea for an explanation. "I've been here since late last night. I haven't gone near Legacy."

"You were seen at the stables this morning. A bright pair of yellow pants and light-brown hair."

"If you believe that, then why don't you finish whatever it is you're going to do to me? What are you planning to do, Conn? Strangle me? Make up your mind. I'm getting cold out here on the sand."

"Damn you!"

For an instant she thought he really was going to strangle her. But before Honor's instinctive scream could leave her lips her mouth was crushed beneath his.

It was not a kiss of passion or gentleness. There was nothing but naked despair and masculine outrage involved. When Conn finally raised his head, Honor's mouth felt bruised, her body as if it were trapped under a granite boulder. But she knew that Conn wasn't going to strangle her, and the relief she felt was in her eyes.

"Don't get the impression that it's all over, Honor," Conn snarled softly. "It's hardly begun." He rolled off her, uncoiling to his feet and reaching down to pull her roughly up beside him. Without a word he started back, his hand locked around her wrist.

He shoved open the door of the unlocked cottage, tugging Honor in behind him. Then he released his victim. His gray eyes raked her. "Go take a hot shower and change your clothes. You're a mess."

Honor didn't argue. She fled to the single bedroom and locked herself inside. Unsteadily she began to undress. Conn was right. She needed that shower. She had never felt so cold in her life.

When she emerged from the shower sometime later and tugged on a fresh pair of jeans and a bulky knit sweater, Honor felt more in command of herself.

Conn was in the kitchen, running water into the coffeepot, concentrating on the task as if it took all his attention. "Sit down, Honor. We have to talk."

"About what?" She sank wearily into a chair. "I've been tried and convicted, haven't I?"

"The evidence is pretty conclusive. And then there's motive." He threw himself into a chair across from her. "We both know you think you had a motive, don't we?"

Her hand curved into a fist. "I had a motive, all right. I was the one who felt betrayed. But I'll tell you this, Landry. If I had set out to get even, I'd have gone after you directly. I wouldn't have involved an innocent animal." She shook her head in despairing wonder.

Conn shifted restlessly. "If I said I believed you, was willing to accept the possibility that it wasn't you who put the apples in Legacy's feed, would you let the situation between us go back to the way it was before . . . yesterday?"

"A few minutes ago there wasn't any doubt at all in your mind that I was the one who had tried to poison Legacy. Why are you willing to consider other possibilities now, Conn?"

He looked at her, then he said softly, "During the past few years I learned how to take a few risks. I do my best to minimize them, but that doesn't mean I can't take them. What about you, Honor? Can you take them?"

Honor drew a long breath and clasped her hands in her lap, not looking at him. "I might. For the right man. But you're not that man, are you, Conn? The right man for me would never have believed me capable of trying to avenge myself by poison-

ing a horse. He wouldn't have threatened violence. He would have trusted me when the chips were down."

"The chips are down," he bit out huskily. "And I'm willing to...to consider your side of the story. I could almost believe that even if you did it, you might have thought you had a reason."

The awkward, uncertain way he said it infuriated Honor. Her head snapped toward him. "Oh, golly gee, thanks. Heck of a deal you're offering, Landry."

He moved then, reaching down to haul her abruptly to her feet. "Believe me," he muttered, his face very close to hers, his eyes ablaze with a strange light, "it's better than the deals I usually offer." Conn's arms locked around her as he brought his mouth down on hers.

But this time the kiss was different. Honor sensed the change at once and relaxed faintly, letting his frustrated, demanding need wash over her in waves. He needed love whether he knew it or not. And a part of him was trying to reach out and take it even though another aspect of his nature was warning him that she was capable of betrayal. The conflict within him was almost palpable.

Slowly she pulled free of his embrace and he let her go reluctantly.

"Honor?"

"It's almost lunchtime."

He hesitated and then followed her. "Are you going to feed me?" Conn asked with deliberate mockery.

"I'm going to feed myself. I can make an extra sandwich for you, if you'd like."

"Yes," he said quietly, "I'd like."

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HONOR LAY alone in bed that night and wondered for the hundredth time what was going through Conn Landry's head. He was out there in the living room, supposedly sleeping on the couch. He'd accepted the arrangement without a murmur of protest, as if he couldn't have cared less where he slept.

But Honor hadn't slept at all since going to bed an hour and a half earlier. Dinner had been a quiet affair under the tense circumstances. Honor had considered various ways of telling Conn that he couldn't stay the night, but all the phrases of rejection had died on her lips.

Deep down, she didn't want him to leave. A tentative truce had been established and she wanted time to pursue it, time to rebuild some basis for trust.

Still, she wasn't going to get to sleep tonight at this rate, and the turbulent state of her emotions demanded some positive action.

With a surge of determination she pushed aside the covers and reached for her robe. She found the living room illuminated only with the faintly smoldering ruins of the fire, and stood very still in the doorway, not certain what to say now that the moment was upon her.

"Conn?"

"Go back to bed, Honor." Conn didn't move.

"I want to talk to you," she said.

"I don't think that's such a good idea right now." He kept his brooding gaze on the fire.

Honor took another step and then a third. Then she was standing by his

chair. "I can't sleep, and it doesn't look as though you can, either. We need to talk, Conn."

"Get out of here, Honor. Believe me, it would be best if you went back to your room. I'm not—sure of myself right now. I'm not sure that I'm in complete control."

He sounded vaguely dazed by the admission. Honor touched his fingers as they lay curling tightly into the arm of the chair. "It's all right, Conn. I'm not in complete control, either. But, then, I never am around you." She risked a tentative smile.

He stared at her. "Woman, do you know what you're doing?"

"Yes. No. Not completely. I only know I can't go back into that bedroom alone. There is too much going on between us. Too much that is unsettled."

His hand caught her questing fingers in a grip of iron. "Unsettled questions are dangerous, Honor. Don't you know that?" He uncoiled to his feet, and Honor felt the fine trembling in his touch as he pulled her slowly, inevitably, against the length of his body. The heat in him seemed to reach out, engulfing her, and she responded with a soft cry.

He lifted her face with the edge of his palm. For a few seconds he stared down into her soft eyes and then he muttered something that was swallowed up in the kiss that followed.

Conn's mouth was a furnace of damp heat that communicated his passion without any restraint. His hands slid down her back to her hips, moving possessively on her. The fierce urgency in him sought to overtake her and bring her to the ground.

"Honor, I have to have you now. I couldn't stop even if I wanted to try. Woman, you don't know how it is with me tonight, what I feel like inside. I'm burning." Conn's mouth moved heavily on hers, staking a claim before moving to the curve of her shoulder.

Honor gasped as she felt the light touch of his teeth on her bare skin. Then her robe was being loosened, discarded at her feet. She shivered as his hands shaped the curves of her breasts, the heat of his palms sinking into her through the soft nightgown. And then the interior of the cottage spun around her as Conn abruptly swept her up into his arms.

Conn settled her into the depths of the tousled bed and stood for a moment looking down at her. Then he moved across her body with the power of a wave breaking on a reef. Honor felt herself responding vibrantly, her body achingly alive and aware.

She traced the outline of Conn's hard, muscled frame with soft fingers that held a woman's demands. He groaned in response to her touch, pushing himself into her palm when she drew her hand down his thighs.

"Conn," she whispered as the driving power in him throbbed under her touch.

"I want you, Honor. I can't stop wanting you," he rasped. His lips roved from one nipple to the other, exciting and challenging. When Honor lifted her hips instinctively, moving against him with unconscious need, he traced a sensuous path down her body to the apex of her legs. "Open for me, sweetheart. Let me feel the passion in you."

She writhed beneath him, obeying the command. Then she felt his fin-

gers working exotic magic amid the secrets of her body and she cried out again.

"You want me," he growled, pushing his strong legs between her soft thighs. "Say it. Say you want me!"

"Yes, darling. I want you. With everything that's in me. I've never needed anyone the way I need you."

Her words seemed to thrust him over the edge. Conn muttered her name between clenched teeth, and then he was forging into her warmth, claiming her fire for his own with relentless force.

"Hold me, Honor," he ordered with an aching harshness. "Wrap yourself around me and don't let go!"

Honor had the impression that Conn wasn't even aware of his own rough command but with all her strength she clung to him, riding the whirlwind. The final burst of unraveling excitement sent shivers through her that generated a powerful reaction in Conn. His fingers sank into the skin of her shoulders and he arched heavily into her softness. There was a thick muffled, wholly male cry of release and satisfaction from far back in his throat and then he was collapsing damply along her body.

HONOR AWOKE a long time later, vaguely aware that she was lying alone in bed. It took a moment to orient herself, and when she did, she sat up in sudden panic.

"Conn?"

"I'm in the kitchen. I wanted a glass of water."

"Oh." It was two-thirty a.m. Now that she was awake, Honor felt a little thirsty herself. She padded barefoot into the kitchen. Conn was standing

near the sink, drinking his water while he studied a shot of Stylish Legacy.

"You know, I think Legacy inherited his sire's basic conformation, especially the strong hindquarters."

Honor smiled. "You've got it bad, Conn."

"What?" He glanced at her in surprise.

"Racing. My father was that way about it. He tried to keep Stylish Legacy just a business deal, but he was hooked on the whole racing scene."

Conn watched her drink her water. "So was my father. Just look at the two of them in this photo. You'd think they'd won the Kentucky Derby."

Honor's gaze followed his. She rarely looked at the photos closely. "They do look quite pleased with themselves," she acknowledged softly, moving across the kitchen to glance at another photo. Her trained eye began to pick out details, the color of the jockey's silks and the cowboy hat on the man standing directly behind Richard Stoner.

Honor blinked and leaned closer.

"What is it?" Conn asked.

"I think this guy in the hat is also in that other photo."

"The trainer, probably."

"No, I don't think so. There's something familiar about that hat, Conn." Honor went back to stare at the other picture. "Same hat. I can't see his face, but I'd swear there was something about him..." Honor moved to yet another picture, where the face was much clearer. "Conn! It's Ethan Bailey. A lot slimmer, but I'd swear it's Ethan."

Conn leaned over her shoulder. "You're right. But Ethan barely knew either of our fathers. Why would he

show up in three different winner's circle photos with them?"

He shook his head. "We'll have to ask him about it sometime." He reached for Honor's hand. "Come on, honey, let's go back to bed. My feet are getting cold. Along with a few other parts of my anatomy."

"You expect me to warm all of those parts?"

"It would be a nice, considerate gesture."

A wifely gesture, Honor thought wistfully. But she kept the comment to herself.

"You know," Conn observed lazily as he snuggled Honor down into the covers a moment later. "I feel as though I'm finally able to think normally again." Just then his new clear-headedness reminded him of the question he had intended to ask Honor. He paused, his mouth hovering over hers.

"How did you find out I was Richard Stoner's son?"

Honor said calmly, "Ethan Bailey told me."

Landry swore and sat up in bed. "Why is it that every time I turn around lately, Ethan Bailey's nearby?"

"Didn't you realize that Ethan knew who you were?" Honor asked. She lay propped up on the pillows, as Conn swung his feet out and turned on the lamp.

"The subject never came up with Ethan." Conn stared unseeingly at the wall, his face set in familiar, harsh lines.

Uneasily Honor leaned forward. "Conn?"

"Ethan was the one who found the apples in Legacy's feed this morning.

The one who told me you'd been seen around the barns very early today."

"Oh." She didn't quite know what to say.

Conn met her eyes, his gaze cold and intent. "When did he tell you who I was?"

"Yesterday. He came downtown to my office and said he felt obliged to warn me that you might not be telling me the whole truth about yourself," Honor said in a low voice. "He also told me you lied about Granger. That he hadn't walked into any trap."

"The implication being, of course, that I hadn't saved you from getting mixed up in the mess. That the whole story had been a fabrication designed to establish a link between you and me. A link I could use."

"So Granger really did walk into a trap?"

"Oh, yes. And he was released on bail shortly after."

Honor nodded. "All right. We've got a situation in which Ethan Bailey keeps cropping up, apparently wanting to make us distrust each other."

"He sure as hell implied that it had to be you who tried to poison Legacy," Conn said. "But why? It makes no sense."

"I know. No sense at all."

"There's another name that keeps recurring, too—Granger." Conn became thoughtful.

"Remember that guy in the pickup truck who hassled me?"

"Yes." He looked at her sharply.

"Well, I could have sworn a similar truck followed me when I left Pasadena yesterday evening."

Conn was suddenly tense. "You're sure?"

"No. No, I'm not sure," she said honestly. "But it made me nervous. Then it disappeared. It was probably just my imagination."

"Right now I'm not willing to write anything off to imagination," Conn said bluntly. "The guy in the pickup truck could be associated with Granger," Conn said slowly. "But I don't know why. Granger and I did business. When it was concluded, I thought each side was reasonably satisfied."

"Maybe he didn't like the way you got involved," Honor suggested.

"I guess he might have decided to teach me a lesson." He sounded as though he thought it unlikely. And with that Conn surged to his feet, pulling on his jeans. "Maybe I can get a few answers about Granger at least."

"In the middle of the night?" Honor asked.

"Some of the people who would know about Granger tend to work the night shift," Conn informed her. "In my line of work I make contacts on both sides of the fence."

"What are you going to do?" Honor tugged on her robe.

"Make a few phone calls."

Honor followed him, saw the sudden hardening of his expression as he picked up the receiver.

"What's wrong?"

"Phone's out of order." He stood staring at her.

"Are you sure? There hasn't been a storm recently."

"No, there hasn't, has there? Get dressed, Honor."

"Dressed! But it's three o'clock in the morning."

"I'm aware of that. It's three o'clock in the morning, the phone's

out of order, and we're miles from town. I want us both out of here. Now."

"All right, all right, I'm going," she said quickly. Honor yanked on jeans and a vividly striped cotton sweater.

Moments later, Conn slammed the front door behind them, fishing the Porsche keys out of his pocket. "Get into the car, Honor."

She was beginning to absorb some of his strange sense of urgency. He was twisting the key in the ignition even as she dropped into the seat beside him. The normally responsive engine came alive briefly, shuddered and died.

Conn swore and tried again. He didn't bother to try a third time. Instead, he announced mildly, "We have very big trouble."

"We could try my car," she volunteered.

"We could, but I have a strange hunch it wouldn't do any good." He shoved open the car door. "Let me have the keys. We'll give it a try."

When her car didn't start, Conn was out of the seat, grabbing Honor's wrist and yanking her along behind him before the car door had swung shut.

"You think someone sabotaged the cars?" she gasped.

It wasn't Conn who answered her. "If he does think that, he'd be right," drawled a man who stepped around the corner of the cottage, allowing the weak moonlight to illuminate the gun he held.

Honor was so startled that she stumbled heavily against Conn. Reaching out to steady her, he managed to pull her even more off-balance and in the next instant they both tumbled to the ground.

"You got a problem, lady?" demanded the gunman. "Get up. Both of you. Mr. Granger don't want no delays."

"Granger!" The astonishment as well as the anger in Conn's tone was real. "I thought Granger and I had a deal," Conn said, projecting his voice over the increasing noise of the surf. The gunman was herding his captives out onto the beach where there was virtually no cover behind which a desperate man could dodge. The sand dragged at Conn's shoes and caused Honor to stumble occasionally.

"Mr. Granger don't like the way you conduct business, slick. He said to tell you that you won't be getting in his way again after tonight. It's me that's got a deal with Granger," the punk added with pride.

Honor spoke for the first time, glancing over her shoulder. She shivered under Conn's hand. "You're the man in the black pickup truck who followed me home, aren't you?"

"You got it, lady."

"And you followed her out of Pasadena?" Conn put in.

"Had to see where you were heading. We knew that wherever the broad went, you'd be sure to follow."

Conn thought about that. "Is that right?"

"You shouldn't have tried to mess around with Granger, Landry. He's big-time."

"The only reason Granger got to be big-time is because he pays people like you to take the risks for him," Conn pointed out calmly.

"Shut up, unless you want it here and now."

"I take it here and now isn't the way Granger wants it done?" Conn retorted.

"Granger was real particular about how he'd like this done, but if you get tricky, I'm supposed to go ahead and finish things any way I can."

"Where are we going?" Honor asked softly.

"Down to the far end of the beach. The water's supposed to be dangerous down by the point. Couple of bodies might not resurface for days, if ever."

"I see," Honor muttered.

Conn felt her drawing in deep, even breaths, trying to control her fear.

"Were you the one who moved the screen in my bedroom?" she asked tightly.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, lady. I ain't never been in your bedroom."

Conn slanted a quick, curious glance down at Honor but she was concentrating on her footing, having more than the normal amount of trouble walking in the sand. Her present lack of coordination suited him perfectly, however. So perfectly that he wondered whether she was stumbling on purpose. There was no doubt that the gunman wasn't paying much attention to her troubles as long as she kept moving. And if she were suddenly to stumble to her knees, he probably wouldn't panic and pull the trigger.

Tentatively, uncertain how to get the message across to Honor, Conn tugged at her arm. Did she actually incline her head slightly? His right hand tightened around the object he had palmed back at the cottage when he'd tugged Honor off-balance the first time. He was only going to get one chance. Be-

side him he felt Honor's new level of tension.

She was going to do it, Conn realized. She knew what he wanted. Honor Mayfield was quite a woman to have beside you in a crisis, he decided.

"Let's move it, you two. Hurry up, lady. What's the matter with you? Can't you walk straight?"

"I'm a little scared," Honor retorted flatly. And then she stumbled to her knees.

Conn released her at once, making no attempt to break her fall. Instead he swung around in a smooth rush, hurling the metal star-shaped object that was in his palm.

"Damn you—" the gunman began to yell at Honor, but he never finished the sentence.

The razor-sharp blades that formed the points on the star sliced into his shoulder, cutting through the denim shirt he wore as though it were silk.

The punk screamed in fear and rage. His arm jerked spasmodically and the gun went flying. It landed on the wet sand at the water's edge and an instant later was lost below a breaking wave.

Conn was on top of the other man in an instant, his body uncoiling with controlled violence.

"Conn!" Honor shot to her feet, her eyes going from the sight of the two men locked together on the beach to the gun that appeared briefly, half covered with wet sand.

Conn's words halted her. "Forget the gun. It's useless now. And our pal here isn't going anywhere. On your feet." Conn nudged his victim with the toe of his shoe. "I'm afraid that your fast-track route up Granger's corporate ladder just met with a delay."

The man glowered in mute rage. He didn't let go of the bleeding wound in his shoulder. "I got to have a doctor," he muttered.

"They don't make house calls anymore," Conn said. "And since our cars are out of commission..."

"My truck," the man gasped, shambling ahead of Conn. "It's parked down the road a ways."

"Good. We can use it to turn you over to the cops."

"Granger will take care of me," the punk declared. "The guy who hired me said he always does."

"Which brings us to an interesting question," Conn murmured. "Just who did hire you?"

"I ain't talking," the man informed him.

Conn turned his attention to Honor. "Are you all right, honey?" he asked as they neared the cottage.

"I'm okay." But she couldn't disguise the flat tone of her voice.

"You handled yourself well back there," Conn went on, his voice husky with approval and pride.

"Gee, thanks. Maybe I've missed my calling somewhere along the line." The flippancy didn't feel any more natural than the tremor in her limbs, but Conn seemed to understand.

"It's all right, Honor," he soothed as he waited for her to open the door. "You'll be fine in a little while."

He watched the wounded man carefully as he followed Honor through the door, so she was first to realize there was another visitor. She stopped short at the sight of a familiar face studying a photo of Stylish Legacy.

"Ethan!" she whispered.

Ethan Bailey swung around to cover the trio in the doorway with the gun in his hand.

"So things didn't go quite perfectly, I see," he noted.

"They rarely do," Conn said, sighing.

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"IT WASN'T MY fault, Mr. Bailey! I swear it wasn't. You got to explain that to Mr. Granger. I did exactly like I was told. But you never told me about that knife thing he carries. He cut me real bad. I got to have a doctor."

"Knife thing?" Ethan eyed Conn. "Oh, yes, that fancy letter opener you said was a souvenir. Let's have it, Landry." He pointed the gun at Honor.

She stood very still, alert to the fact that without the element of surprise Conn would not be able to use his weapon before Ethan could shoot her. Conn dropped the star blade on the floor.

"Much better," Ethan approved. Then he turned his attention to the wounded man. "You'd better go find yourself a doctor. Although it's going to be tricky explaining that wound, isn't it?" Ethan waved the gun encouragingly. "On your way."

"I don't know if I can drive like this."

"Try," Bailey suggested. "Try real hard. Mr. Granger doesn't like screw-ups. If I were you, I think I'd get out of his vicinity. Find some new territory, Tony."

The man called Tony stared at Ethan's mildly implacable face and then left without another word.

Honor stood staring at Ethan Bailey as a strange silence descended on

the small room. All of her nerves felt as though someone had seared them with a flame.

"I take it," Conn said finally, "that poor Tony is under a slight misconception?"

"About the identity of his real employer?" Ethan nodded blandly. "I'm afraid so. Seemed simpler to have the boy think he was working for Granger. He seemed happy enough with the job until a few minutes ago."

"I don't understand," Honor said in a whisper. "Isn't Granger involved at all?"

It was Conn who answered. "No. He was just a very convenient red herring, wasn't he, Ethan?"

"Yup. Would have been even more convenient if old Tony hadn't made a mess of things."

"You want us dead," Honor said in a remote tone.

"It would have been mighty convenient if you two had played your parts out correctly," Ethan explained.

"You mean if I'd really believed she was the one who tried to poison Legacy?" Conn put in casually. He moved slightly, taking a few steps away from Honor.

"Stay where you are, boy. That's far enough." Ethan's gun hand tightened fractionally. Conn stopped.

"Do you mind explaining, Ethan?" Conn asked coolly.

"I'm afraid it's a long tale. And I'm not sure we have time to go into it tonight. I looked up the tides before I planned this. The high tide will be peaking right soon. I want you and the little lady here following it out to sea."

"Assisted by a couple of bullet holes?" Conn said.

"Something like that. Might as well head back down to the point. Hard to find good help these days."

Honor felt Conn tense. He would do anything he could to protect her, she knew. She had to act first or risk having him throw himself straight into Ethan's gun.

"You can take care of us, but it's going to be tough to stop the gossip that will be hitting the track when this is all over," Honor told Ethan with sudden conviction.

"You don't have to worry about the gossip. You won't be around."

"I'm not talking about what people will say of Conn and me. It's what they'll be speculating about you that should interest you. My sister, Adena, knows everything I know. I left the information on her answering machine this afternoon."

"Now just what the devil are you talking about, little lady?" Ethan demanded.

"I'm talking about the fact that Adena won't keep her mouth shut. When I don't return from this little jaunt she's liable to go straight to the police."

"With what?" Ethan snapped, focusing entirely on Honor.

She played her one and only card. "With the information that there was another owner of Stylish Legacy fifteen years ago. A silent partner named Ethan Bailey."

The effect on Bailey was electric. The easy, good-old-boy image disappeared, leaving the face of an embittered man.

"You're lying, bitch," he breathed tightly. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

"Don't I? It's all there," Honor said, gesturing calmly toward the wood-and-iron locker that sat in the corner, draped with the folded horse blanket. "All the proof anyone would ever need."

"What proof?" Bailey hissed, his gaze momentarily riveted on the locker. But he kept the gun firmly pointed at Honor. "*What proof?*"

Honor sucked in her breath. She had to make this sound good. "Dad was a businessman. As excited as he used to get about Stylish Legacy's wins, he always claimed the horse was really nothing more than an elaborate tax shelter. And so he kept very good records."

"I don't believe you," Bailey snarled. "If you knew anything you would have put it all together long ago."

Honor shook her head. "I never wanted to go through all the records and souvenirs my father had left to me. It was too painful. If I hadn't met you at the track, I would never have recognized the third man who always seemed to show up in Stylish Legacy's winning photos," Honor told him simply. "Once I realized you were in so many of those shots and I saw the expression on your face—"

"The expression on my face!"

Honor inclined her head ruefully. "It's always the same, the expression on the face of the owners and trainers. That look of satisfaction and victory and excitement. It's unique. And it's on your face too."

"That proves absolutely nothing!"

"True, but it was enough to make me curious. I started looking through some of Dad's records and papers. It's all here, Ethan," she concluded, hop-

ing she wouldn't have to fake it any further. It was very difficult being creative when someone was holding a gun on you. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Conn advance on catlike feet. The older man's attention was still zeroed in on Honor.

"You're lying," Ethan muttered. "There's nothing in that trunk."

"Want to see the records?" Honor taunted.

"You're damn right, I want to see them!"

Honor bent down to lift the heavy horse blanket.

"Bailey!" Conn snapped loudly.

Ethan swiveled around at the clipped command, panicking as he realized that Conn was much too close to him. But Honor already had the blanket in motion, whipping it toward Bailey.

"Damn you!" He pulled the trigger reflexively as the blanket settled around his head and shoulders. The shot went wild.

In the same instant Conn was on him, propelling the older man to the floor and wrenching the gun free. It was all over in a moment.

Ethan Bailey groaned and sat up slowly. He looked like a broken man. Or one who has come to the end of a long road. It was Conn who spoke first.

"I think," he said, "that it's time we had some answers." He sat down on the trunk beside Honor, the gun held almost casually in his right hand. "Were you really a silent partner in Stylish Legacy?" he asked, staring at Ethan.

"Ask her, she seems to know all about it," Bailey muttered, massaging his head.

"It was an educated guess," Honor confessed. "I've never looked inside the trunk."

"You might as well tell us everything," Conn suggested, watching Bailey with a brooding expression.

Bailey glowered at him and then went limp. "If you really start digging you'll probably find it," he admitted. "For fifteen years I've been afraid of what would happen if someone went looking for answers. I thought I was safe because no one seemed inclined to probe too deeply. I had to let you sell Stylish Legacy, of course. I didn't dare come forth with a claim on the horse. That would have been too risky."

Conn thought about that for a moment. "You didn't want anyone to know you had a financial interest in the horse," he finally said, "because if someone knew that he might suspect that you were involved with our parents in other ways?"

Bailey nodded with a dismal air. "Couldn't take any chances. It hurt to lose Stylish Legacy. Best colt on the West Coast in those days. When I learned one of his colts got picked up by Richard Stoner's son, I had a feeling..." His voice trailed off sadly. "I thought I'd just make contact with you, Landry. Transfer a couple of my horses over to Humphrey's stable. I could keep tabs on you that way."

"And then I got in touch with Nick Mayfield's daughter," Conn murmured.

"It all seemed to be getting too dangerous, too close."

Honor frowned. "You tried to plant a few seeds of doubt at first."

"If you'd backed away from him everything might have gone back to being safe." Ethan sighed. "But you

didn't. I knew that once you knew who he was, you'd probably get angry," Bailey explained. "And I thought that if Landry believed you tried to poison Legacy, he'd be furious."

"So you set up the situation and then you hired good old Tony to pull the trigger, right?" Conn growled. "Okay, I can figure that much out for myself. But why didn't you want your association with my stepfather and Mayfield to come to light? Seems to me, there could only be one reason for that."

Honor held her breath. "You killed them?" she whispered, staring at Ethan. "You killed my father and Stoner?"

A forbidding silence settled on the room and then Bailey nodded once. "Had to, don't you see? They found out I'd been running guns, using their connections and facilities in the Middle East. The night they got wise, I had to act. There wasn't time to think."

"After that I got nervous," Bailey admitted. "I figured my luck was running out. Decided to get out of the gunrunning business altogether. After all, I'd made a pile. Time to invest it in more legitimate things."

Conn and Honor looked at him for a long time. Bailey seemed unaware of their emotions, lost in his own world, examining where it had all gone wrong.

"You bastard," Conn finally said. But there was no heat in the words, only a weary acceptance that the past could not be changed.

"I knew," Honor said softly. "I knew there was something wrong with the notion that Stoner and Mayfield had betrayed each other. It never felt right."

Conn nodded. "I know. Too many loose ends. But now we know the answers." He sounded strangely satisfied.

Honor understood the feeling. There was a deep sadness underlying it, but also a sense of peace. No more loose ends.

Well, maybe one. Honor turned to Ethan. "Was it you who moved the screen in my bedroom?"

He came out of his gloomy reverie long enough to appear vaguely startled. "How did you know I searched your room? I hardly touched a thing!"

Honor's mouth twisted wryly. "One thing slightly off is all it takes, I'm afraid. I'm beginning to think my eye for detail is going to be the bane of my existence."

Bailey slipped back into his memories. "I just wanted to see if you had any stuff on Stylish Legacy lying around. Didn't realize you had all the answers here at the beach house."

"Neither did I," Honor said.

It was midmorning by the time Ethan Bailey had been taken into custody and the necessary paperwork completed. The authorities notified the hospital emergency rooms in the area to be on the alert for a man of Tony's description.

Honor and Conn returned to Pasadena late that afternoon, and talked quietly over dinner at Honor's apartment. Gradually they both began to relax and accept what had happened. There was a feeling of companionship, of being bonded together, Honor thought at one point. She and Conn now shared a past and the secrets that had been buried there. It deepened the

sense of commitment she felt about the future, but something was missing.

The thought flitted through her mind, as Honor was slipping rapidly into sleep. Her body curled deep into the comforting warmth of Conn's as they lay together in her bed.

Tomorrow, Honor promised herself just before she closed her eyes. Tomorrow she would find a way to make Conn understand that what he felt for her was love. He could commit himself; she didn't doubt that. He could also give passion and protection. In turn he demanded a great deal. Loyalty, respect, commitment, passion—all of those and more she had given him. She had given him her love. But he wasn't able yet to admit that he was vulnerable and that what he felt for her was love.

Until Conn could do that there would always be loose ends in their relationship.

HONOR OPENED her eyes to find Conn sitting up against the headboard, the sheet carelessly bunched at his waist. He had a mug of coffee in his hand.

"You're certainly chipper this morning," she complained. "Isn't it a little early to be looking so alert? After all we've been through, I think we deserve some extra sleep."

"I've been thinking," he told her very seriously.

"Oh?" She eyed the coffee with increasing interest.

"We can fly to Vegas this afternoon, spend the night in one of the big hotels and be back here in time to see Legacy run tomorrow afternoon."

Honor tried to assimilate all that. "I suppose we could. Any reason why we

should? And did you make me a cup of coffee?"

Conn reached around to lift another mug off the end table. "Here. And the reason for going to Vegas is because it would be the quickest and easiest way to get married."

"Married!" Honor nearly spilled the hot coffee. "Are you quite certain you want marriage, Conn?" she asked.

His expression grew even more implacable. "It's the only logical conclusion. You love me, remember? I can make you come alive with passion. I've saved your neck. We share a bond that goes back fifteen years. We're committed to each other. Are you going to deny it?"

"No, I'm not denying it but I'll be darned if I'll let you push me into marriage when you don't know how you feel toward me!"

He stared at her in astonishment. "What the devil do you think you're saying? I know how I feel toward you. You're mine. I'll take care of you, protect you, make love to you. What more do you want from me?"

"Love! I want you to understand that what you feel for me is love!"

He reached out and caught her wrist, removing the coffee mug from her fingers. He caught her chin under his thumbs and lifted her mouth for a quick, hard kiss that conveyed the full scope of his feelings. When he freed her mouth he went on huskily, "I want everything you can give me, including this thing you call love. I'm not altogether sure just what you mean by it but I want it."

"It's yours, Conn. It will always be yours."

He shook his head once. "I'll give you everything I can in return, honey."

"I know."

He exhaled slowly, as if a great weight had been lifted from him. Then Conn folded her close, holding her in silence for a long moment before he spoke again.

"Vegas?"

She nodded her head against his chest. "Yes."

"I'll get the tickets this afternoon."

*

LEGACY WON by a full three lengths the following afternoon. No sooner had the results flashed on the board than Conn was dragging his new bride toward the winner's circle. Adena grinned delightedly as she hastened along beside her sister.

Laughing with excitement, Honor allowed herself to be swept up in Conn's wake, her new gold band sparkling in the sunlight. Breathlessly she stood beside Legacy's proud owner as the photograph was taken.

"He gave you both a great wedding gift," Adena observed. "When are you leaving for the beach house?"

"Just as soon as I can get Honor into the car," Conn vowed.

"Don't you just love a forceful man?" cooed Adena. "How long are you going to be gone?"

"Just a couple of days." Conn was striding briskly through the crowd, towing the two women behind him. "Honor has to get back to work."

"That was great news about the police locating that awful Tony person, wasn't it?" Adena commented. "Imagine finding him locked inside a tack room. Makes you wonder how he got inside, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does," Conn said with great feeling. "Racing gear is expen-

sive, though. They have to keep it locked up. I suppose Tony went into one of those rooms and someone locked the door, not realizing he was inside."

"Sure." Honor grinned. "And then a casually patrolling guard just happened to check the tack room, recognized him instantly and turned him over to the cops. Very neat."

Conn slanted her a look. "Very."

"Listen," Adena was waving at a young man dressed in leather and silk, "I see someone I know. He'll give me a ride home. Have a good time at the beach. When you get back, we'll throw a real bash. 'Bye!'"

Conn swung an assessing glance at the young man in the exotic clothes. "You know him?"

"Oh, yes. That's Jason. He's quite safe, Conn. You don't have to play big brother."

He shrugged and turned back to the task of getting Honor out to the waiting Porsche. "I only do it for your sake," he explained.

"What? Play big brother?" Honor smiled. "I know." He would worry about Adena because he was in love with Honor and what affected Honor, affected Conn. It was an intricate, tightly woven web, one neither of them could escape. And one day, Honor promised herself, Conn would know that the kind of emotional involvement he was feeling was called love.

Conn slid into the driver's seat and thrust the key into the ignition. There was a strange mixture of satisfaction and hunger in his expression that had been there since last evening when he'd slipped the ring on Honor's finger. She still shivered when she remembered the passionate, possessive way he had

made love to her later in the elegant hotel room.

The drive back up the coast to the beach cottage was a pleasant one. The sun was shining but the clouds were gathering far out at sea. There would be a storm later, Honor knew.

Conn took her for a long walk on the beach before they sat down to a meal of paella with wine. Honor teased her new mate about his ability in the kitchen and he assured her she had gotten a real bargain of a husband.

It wasn't until they were sitting together on the sofa in front of the fire, sipping brandy, that Honor's gaze fell on the old trunk.

"What are you thinking, honey?" Conn asked.

"I was just wondering what, exactly, might be in that old trunk. I never really did go through Dad's stuff properly. Maybe it's time I took a look."

Conn watched her for a moment or two and then got to his feet and went across the room to unlatch the iron lock. Honor joined him, looking down into the trunk.

"Just more photos and form books and copies of the racing trade journals," she observed. Kneeling, she began to lift out some of the yellowed papers.

They spent nearly two hours going through the contents of the trunk. Conn stopped as a small, leather-bound book fell from a folded copy of the Daily Racing Form. "What's that?"

"Looks like a diary or a notebook," Honor said. She stared at the bold scrawl on the pages inside. "My father's. I'm sure of it. It looks like a

financial record. Ethan Bailey?" Honor peered at the page.

Conn nodded. "There had to be some record. You just don't borrow a huge sum of money from a man like Ethan Bailey and not keep track of the payback. It's all here. A good accountant could probably trace the whole history of the transaction, given this book."

Honor sighed a long time later as Conn closed the book and set it back inside the trunk. "It's all there."

"Do you want to make it public? It's an old tale and it happened in a foreign country a long time ago."

"I wonder what story Bailey is giving the police?"

Conn shook his head. "I doubt he'll open up that weapons-smuggling scandal. He's too smart to raise more questions about his past than necessary."

"But what if he does, Conn? He could drag our fathers' names through the mud again."

"This time around we'll have the book," he said.

She smiled gently. "I think we could survive just about anything together."

He reached out to close the trunk. "This is such old news now that very few people would be interested, anyway. Except for the folks who hang around racetracks. It would probably just focus a lot of attention on Legacy. Might be just the touch of magic he needs to make his name in racing circles. Great horses always have stories and myths told about them."

Honor broke out laughing. "You're one determined owner, Conn Landry. You've got the fever."

He pulled her into his arms, his gray eyes suddenly intent. "Not nearly as

bad as the fever I've got for you, Honor Mayfield Landry. And I think I've finally got a word to describe it. It's been burning in my mind ever since I made you my wife."

She went still in his arms. "Has it, Conn?"

"I love you, Honor." The words came from him in a thick, husky voice that shook her to the core. "I don't know why it took me so long to realize it."

"I'm glad, Conn," she whispered, touching the side of his face. "I love you so much."

His surging wonder was contagious. Honor's own happiness was shining in her eyes as Conn carried her into the bedroom.

The storm that had been building out at sea broke just as Conn came down onto the bed alongside Honor. He gathered her into his arms, all the words that had once been so alien tumbling forth in a glorious litany of love.

"Hold me," he breathed as he flowed over her body and let himself sink into her welcoming warmth. "Hold me, Honor. I love you so much."

Honor held him, giving herself up to the passion that was binding them together as he proved beyond a doubt that he, Conn Landry, knew how to love.



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #12
Vol. 2 No. 6**

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VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON

Mingled Hearts



Opposites attract, but Stephanie knew that falling in love with Lloyd Barclay would only complicate her life.



“‘Y ou’re backing out on me!” Stephanie scrambled to her feet. “You’re sticking me with a double mortgage payment!”

“You won’t be stuck, I promise.” Valerie’s dark eyes pleaded for understanding.

“You expect me to share this apartment with some stranger?” Twin flames of anger lit Stephanie’s blue eyes. She slid her hands into the back pockets of her cutoffs and surveyed the living room cluttered with cardboard boxes and crumpled newspaper. “Do you know *anything* about this person?”

“A little. Marge just referred to her as Dr. Barclay. I think she’s a marine biologist at Scripps.” Valerie walked to the large sliding doors that opened on their fourth-story balcony. “That should be a selling point, you know. The institute’s right over there.” She waved her hand toward the curved shoreline north of La Jolla Cove.

Stephanie joined her friend at the open door. Her eyes moved over the half-moon beach and sculptured sandstone cliffs of the cove, then traveled down the line of surf to the buildings of Scripps Institute of Oceanography. Damn. Val’s decision to marry Jim was ruining everything.

Valerie pulled her attention from the turquoise sweep of water. Covertly she eyed her friend. “Forgive me?”

Stephanie glanced up in surprise and read the guilt in her friend’s face.

“Sure I do,” she said quickly, hugging the taller woman.

“Thanks.” The strain eased from Valerie’s delicate face, but the sound of the doorbell brought a new look of apprehension. “I guess they’re here.”

Stephanie swallowed nervously. “Might as well get this thing over with.” She took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Oh, you’re not—” She looked into eyes the color of ripe wheat and felt an illogical tremor of recognition. Yet she knew she’d never met the man whose broad shoulders filled the doorway. “Excuse me, I was expecting . . .” Her apology died on her lips as she glimpsed Marge bustling up behind the stranger. Her green eyes were watchful, wary as she made a rapid introduction.

“Dr. Barclay, I’d like you to meet Dr. Collier.”

Silence stretched between them like a taut rubber band.

“You’re—” they began in unison, then stopped, staring at each other in disbelief.

Marge held up manicured hands. “All right, I admit I practiced a slight deception.”

“*Slight* deception?” The man raked a shock of dark hair from his forehead.

Marge sighed. “If either of you had known the truth, you would have rejected the idea without meeting each other. So I took a chance.” The real-estate woman’s natural optimism bubbled.

bled forth. "Of course! I know how you must feel, Lloyd, but wait until you see the view from your bedroom. Stephanie's taken the one on the right..." Her voice trailed off as she walked into the other bedroom. Lloyd followed, stoic tolerance in his bearing.

"Valerie, so help me, if you knew this before—" Stephanie whirled to face her friend.

"I didn't! I swear I thought she was bringing a woman," Valerie protested.

Stephanie crossed her arms and stood stiffly until Lloyd and Marge reentered the living room.

"And of course you get the same spectacular view of the cove from the living room, which also opens on the balcony through these sliding doors," Marge explained, pushing the door aside and silently inviting Lloyd to step onto the balcony. As if to get away from her constant chatter, he walked over to the wrought-iron railing and scanned the expanse of sparkling water.

Marge tiptoed over to Stephanie. "I wouldn't be so quick to throw away your chance to live here, if I were you," she warned. "The market's tight, and I can't guarantee someone else, much less a woman, will come along."

Stephanie felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. She glanced furtively at the broad-shouldered figure on the balcony. Something about the set of the man's shoulders disturbed her. Except for Gary, she'd always been able to handle the men in her life, to keep them in safe compartments where they didn't interfere with her goals. Something told her Lloyd

Barclay would defy that kind of control. As if sensing her scrutiny, he turned, his golden eyes trained directly on her. For a moment their eyes locked, then each looked away as he strode back into the room.

"It's hard to argue with that wonderful view."

Stephanie saw a difference in his face. The resistance was still there, but a gleam of anticipation shone through. Unexpectedly her heart hammered against her ribs.

"Okay, Marge, I like the place, but what about Stephanie's objections? Suppose she has a boyfriend who might not appreciate having her live with another man?"

"As a matter of fact, there is someone," Stephanie babbled, deciding on the spur of the moment that Jeremy might be good protection from her rampant thoughts. "Jeremy and I are practically engaged." Deliberately she avoided Valerie's amused glance.

"Wouldn't he have a fit about this?"

Stephanie shivered. The conversation was becoming far too personal. "I don't know." *He won't give a damn, if the truth be known*, she amended to herself.

"Then he's a fool," Lloyd muttered.

Crazily, the words warmed a place in her heart that had been cold for a long, long time.

Slowly Lloyd's golden eyes evaluated her, traveling lazily from tousled head to grubby sneakers. "I think you and I need to go to lunch and talk this over. And that's the perfect outfit for riding on the back of my motorcycle."

"Motorcycle?"

"I think that's a terrific idea," chortled Marge. "Well, I'll just mosey back to the office."

"And I have a date with Jim for lunch," Valerie added. "Something about picking out a ring." Excitement shone in her dark eyes, and Stephanie gave her arm a quick squeeze.

"I *am* glad for you, Val." She grabbed the key ring from the kitchen counter before following the others out the door.

Forlornly she stood beside the polished ebony cycle, watching Marge follow Valerie's Camaro out of the parking lot.

"You'll need this." Lloyd thrust a white helmet in her direction, and she noticed he had already strapped a similar one over his dark hair. Strong fingers grasped the strap and snapped it deftly in place, and Stephanie's face tingled where his knuckles had brushed her cheek.

Awkwardly she swung up her bare leg and managed to straddle the shiny machine.

"Put your arms around my waist," he said. "Try to feel the direction of my shifting weight and shift yours accordingly."

She tensed when he flipped up the kickstand and gunned the engine, but managed to lean in the proper direction as they veered out of the parking lot.

With each turn, her breasts became more sensitive to the shifting muscles of his back and her thighs tingled where they brushed his. At last they swerved into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant.

He grinned at her as she climbed unsteadily from the back of the cycle. "No atmosphere. No ocean view. Let's

see how we feel about this proposed arrangement when the glittering waves aren't seducing us."

She unsnapped the strap of her helmet. His even teeth flashed again, revealing a boyish warmth she found charming. Charming? Gary had once charmed her, too. She would have to be careful. She could not risk another heartbreak. Not when all her plans were at stake.

"Is that a perm or the real thing?" His eyes roved appraisingly over her short blond curls.

"The frizz is real, I'm afraid."

"It suits you." He turned and headed for the chrome-and-glass doors of the restaurant before Stephanie could react to his unexpected compliment.

Within minutes they sat facing each other over a Formica-topped table, munching cheeseburgers and sipping milk shakes.

His golden eyes held hers. "What got you into this mingle business, Stephanie?"

"Money," she said simply. "I couldn't see any way on my teacher's salary to save enough to open my own psych clinic. This co-op condominium is an investment. I plan to sell in a year or two and make enough profit to get me through the first six months of running my own business."

"Why the big push to open your own clinic? Don't you enjoy teaching?"

"It's not bad." Slowly she stirred her milk shake with her straw. "But I got into psychology to help people with problems, not teach others to do that."

"Impatient, are you?" His golden eyes twinkled.

"Perhaps. What about you, Lloyd? A single man in your position should be able to afford a place all to himself."

"True. However, I made the mistake of getting married several years ago, and I'm still paying for it, literally." Bitterness invaded his eyes. He picked up a French fry. "How come your friend is backing out? Did she suddenly remember you snore?" His grin was disarming, and she chuckled.

"No, I have Cupid to thank for this mess. A former love returned and proposed. I can't blame her. If I'd been in her shoes, I probably would have done the same thing."

"Any lost loves in your background?" The question came softly. "What if I'm suddenly stuck with two mortgage payments? I warn you, I'd have a lawyer filing suit before you took that first step down the aisle."

"I give you my word you don't have to worry about that." Gary would never come back and beg her to marry him. An "anachronistic custom," he had called marriage the night she had made such a fool of herself.

"What about Jeremy?" Lloyd insisted. "The words I believe I heard were 'practically engaged.' Wouldn't you rather get him to buy Valerie's half?"

Stephanie twisted the paper from her straw around one finger. She had to explain this carefully to keep Jeremy as a buffer between her and this charming stranger. "He doesn't believe in getting his money tied up in property. He owns some bonds, and someday, when we open a clinic together, I'll use the equity from the mingle and he'll cash in his bonds."

"And in the meantime, he won't mind if you live with another man?"

"You make it sound as if we'd be doing something illicit!" She forced a laugh. "I don't know about you, but I'm very busy. We'll probably never see each other."

"Unless we choose to." Lloyd's tawny eyes seemed to evaluate what her bulky sweatshirt concealed.

She gulped and dropped her eyes.

"The last thing in the world I wanted was a woman as a living partner. I had enough of that when I was married."

"Then perhaps we should forget it."

"Not necessarily." His words brought up her head with a jerk. "If I had never stood on that balcony, I could kiss this idea good-bye without a single regret." His eyes lingered on her face for a moment. "Well, perhaps with one regret."

Stephanie watched him silently, afraid his thoughts had taken the same direction as hers. But without Lloyd, her plans were doomed.

"I'm probably a damn fool for even considering this." He raked his fingers through his dark hair. "What do you think, Stephanie?"

She thought it was the riskiest, most foolhardy thing she'd ever considered. "I think we should give it a try," she said.

"Me, too." His eyes held hers and she felt suddenly short of breath. What was she doing? What would she tell her parents, whose middle-class attitude surely would not accept their daughter living in a co-op with a man? And there was Sigmund. She had forgotten him completely until this moment.

A KEY TURNED in the lock arrested her attention. "He's here." She wiped her

suddenly moist palms against her jeans.

"Anybody home?"

Before she could answer, an ear-splitting shriek shattered the silence.

"Stephanie? My God, are you all right? What—" Lloyd burst into her bedroom and spun in the direction of the awful noise.

"It's my scarlet macaw," she said wearily. Unconsciously she moved between Lloyd and the bird in a protective gesture.

Sigmund tilted his crimson head, regarding them with yellow eyes. "Study the ego," he croaked happily.

"Oh, no," Lloyd groaned. "He talks, too."

"Of course," Stephanie snapped. "Sigmund's very intelligent, and quite tame. Until he gets used to his new surroundings, I'll keep him penned up."

Lloyd brightened slightly. "Does he try to fly out the front door when you open it?" he asked hopefully.

"Don't try it," she warned.

He stared balefully at the crimson-headed bird. "You should have told me about this bird last week."

"I was afraid if I tried to explain a forty-inch talking macaw, you'd back out." She dropped her gaze.

"After that motorcycle ride, even a talking macaw wouldn't have driven me away, Stephanie."

"What?" Startled, she glanced up and met his gaze. What she saw there sent a paralyzing numbness through her system.

"Oh, Stephanie." His words came out as a sigh. "Don't you know I'm as afraid of this attraction between us as you are?" His hand moved up and smoothed the slight crease in her fore-

head. His touch. She had been waiting for it all week without realizing it.

"Don't fight it. You feel it, too."

Her protests fluttered ineffectively against the pressure of his mouth. She squirmed to free herself, but he held her firmly.

With an anguished groan, she wrenched free. "Lloyd! I don't want this," she wailed.

He dropped his arms to his sides, but she saw the clenched fists. "Okay, Stephanie. Maybe I was wrong about your reaction to me."

"Wrong!" squawked Sigmund.

"He'd better keep his comments to himself if he doesn't want to end up in barbecue sauce!" Lloyd stalked from the room, leaving Stephanie a quivering mass of confusion.

She didn't even know Lloyd Barclay! Yet she feared him, feared the ache he inspired.

The doorbell chimed, shaking her away from her thoughts. Jeremy would arrive after the heavy work was done. She hurried to the entryway and yanked open the door.

He held up a bottle of wine. "Housewarming present. It's the best wine \$5.98 can buy."

"Jeremy," she said, "I still have some unpacking to do, and a couple of glasses of that might make me decide to give up for the day."

"What're you trying to do, impress your new roommate?"

Stephanie colored. "Not on your life!"

"Hmm." Jeremy rubbed his rounded chin. "Had an altercation with the marine biologist already?"

"You might say that." She rubbed the back of her neck. "Sigmund gave

a couple of his famous screeches, and Lloyd came unglued."

"Good old Sigmund." Jeremy grinned appreciatively. "I knew I could count on him."

Sigmund let out another eardrum-piercing cry, and Stephanie cringed.

"Is there some way we can keep that bird quiet?" Lloyd tore out of his bedroom, then stopped when he saw Jeremy. "Oh. Sorry if I sounded rude." He looked anything but apologetic.

"He'll grow on you," remarked Jeremy, his pale eyes evaluating Lloyd, then shifting with a worried expression to Stephanie.

He knows, thought Stephanie frantically. He can tell something's gone on between Lloyd and me. "Lloyd, this is Jeremy Hammond," she said a little breathlessly. "Jeremy, Lloyd Barclay."

"Glad to meet you," said Jeremy, shaking hands unenthusiastically. Anger pinched his face, but he managed a smile. "I'll just leave the wine here for another time, and the two of you can work yourselves to death." He plopped the bottle on the counter and left, closing the door with a loud thud behind him.

"I don't think your boyfriend cares for me," Lloyd offered. "But then I didn't take an instant liking to him, either." Golden eyes penetrated the depths of her blue ones for a moment before he turned and walked to his bedroom.

Stephanie stood stock-still for several seconds, then shook her head as if to clear it. "Damn," she said softly, then wandered back to her room to tackle the rest of the unpacking.

By ten o'clock, she lay propped in her own bed studying lecture notes for the next day's classes. It wasn't long before she reached to switch off her bedside lamp. She *had* to get some sleep. Had to...

An intense white light, followed closely by an explosive crash and Sigmund's blood-curdling shriek, jolted Stephanie from sleep. A deafening peal of thunder and the glare of lightning sent her bounding under the covers in terror as Sigmund screeched.

"Stephanie?" Lloyd's large frame loomed in the doorway.

Thunder shook the glass door to the balcony, and instinctively Stephanie catapulted into Lloyd's arms, burying her head against the reassuring warmth of his chest. She felt his arms tighten around her, and a sense of safety began to replace her fright.

"This kind of storm is really something for a midwestern girl," she mumbled against his chest.

He looked at her then, the kindness in his face barely discernible in the darkness. "Only fools wouldn't have a great respect for that kind of power, Stephanie. Don't be ashamed by your fear."

"I'm a psychologist who helps other people overcome their fears, yet I'm not ready to overcome mine."

He chuckled, a warm sound in the chill of the room.

"Well, I feel much better, Lloyd. Thanks." It was a cue, a signal for him to leave her room, and he sensed it. He dropped his arms to his side. "It must be late."

A sudden flash of lightning bathed them both in white light. "Well, good night and sleep tight." He bent his head and aimed a kiss at her cheek, but

an irresistible urge made her turn her head and his lips landed directly on hers.

She felt his sharp intake of breath before he gathered her with a groan into his arms. The sheer nylon of her gown shielded little of the impact as her breasts flattened against the hard wall of his chest.

Already his tongue sought the warm recesses of her mouth and one large hand molded her hips against the soft silk of his robe, where she could easily feel his arousal.

Stephanie fought the urge to arch against him. "Lloyd, I'm sorry. I don't know what made me do that. I didn't mean—"

"Oh, I think you did, Stephanie." He traced the lacy scallop of her neckline to the hollow between her breasts. "Can't you tell how natural this feels, how right?"

"But I hardly know you!" she protested.

"Does Jeremy make you react like this?" His thumb flicked against her nipple and she gasped. "Or this..." Pushing the material away, he bent his head to take the stiffened tip in his teeth. "Beautiful." The word fell around her like a cloak as she stood swaying slightly in front of him. "You're beautiful, Stephanie."

"Lloyd, I think we're making a mistake..."

"Loving is never a mistake, Stephanie. We need each other tonight." His voice drew her magically.

"Good morning, Stephanie!" The voice sounded clearly in the darkness.

"What the h—" Lloyd jumped back.

Suddenly the room felt cold. "Lloyd, I think you'd better go," she said miserably. The spell was broken.

"I may murder that bird," said Lloyd in amazement. "I think Sigmund just ruined what could have been a beautiful moment in our lives, Stephanie."

"I'm sorry, Lloyd, but I'm not willing to trade my future for a moment, no matter how beautiful."

"Is that right?"

Stephanie hugged the sheet around her quaking body, trying to ignore the hurt in his voice.

After she heard the bedroom door shut behind him, she sat up in bed for several minutes, stunned by the sudden turn of events. How had things progressed so far?

STEPHANIE SNAPPED awake to the aroma of freshly perked coffee. How could she face Lloyd after what happened the night before? She wanted to live in this co-op on her own timetable, selling when the market was right instead of when a love affair soured. She had watched office romances, seen the pain when two people were forced to work side by side after a relationship ended. How much worse to have to live with a former lover!

Somehow she had to convince Lloyd of her indifference to his charms. She had to develop the strength to refuse him! Spending more time with Jeremy would help, and Sigmund could be a continuing barrier, just as he inadvertently had been the night before.

Having showered and dressed she smoothed the antique quilt over her bed and strode purposefully out of the bedroom, feeling brave and confident.

"You finally decided to get up."
Lloyd lounged casually on a bar stool.
"My first class isn't until ten."

He looked as if he hadn't slept the night before, and she longed to smooth the lines of fatigue around his eyes.

"You must realize that all your thoughts show on your face." He folded his arms across his chest and regarded her calmly. Then his fingers closed on the soft silk of her sleeve, and her heart tripped into high gear. She noticed the sudden gleam in his golden eyes.

"You were in that shower more than ten minutes. Twelve, to be exact. I shower in less than five."

"Henceforth I will take my alarm clock into the bathroom with me," she flung at him, "unless of course you want to sound a gong outside my door when you think I've used up my quota of hot water."

"We could save even more money if we showered together," he offered. She gaped, her eyes wide, as he struggled to suppress a smile.

"Not on your life!" she exclaimed, and watched helplessly as he broke into laughter, the rich sound filling the apartment.

"If you don't mind, I'll get some fruit for Sigmund's breakfast and be on my way." She lifted her chin, determined to salvage a shred of pride.

"Stephanie." His tone softened.
"About last night—"

"Let's just forget it, shall we?"

"I can guarantee that you won't forget it, and neither will I."

She glared up at him defiantly, meeting the challenge in his eyes with all the strength she could muster, but the longer she tried, the more she seemed to drown in the topaz depths.

"I have to get going or I'll be late for class," she said at last. She turned and walked from the room, certain that his eyes followed her until she disappeared from his sight.

*

"OKAY, SIGMUND, hop onto my shoulder," Stephanie coaxed several days later as she considered what to have for supper. From the doorway of her bedroom she could see Lloyd, sprawled in his shiny black chair reading a new scuba magazine.

"Supper," croaked Sigmund, fluttering gently onto the towel she draped over one shoulder to protect her winter-white eyelet dress.

Lloyd's eyes lifted from the pages of the magazine. He shook his head.

"You know, that dress makes you look like a sacrificial virgin. I find it difficult to think of anything but making love to you."

"So! We're back to that, are we?" Her fingers shook as she sectioned the orange and began feeding it to Sigmund.

"We never left it, Stephanie. You may think your little ploy of keeping Sigmund around will separate us, but it can't work forever. That bird is getting more used to me every day, and soon it won't matter whether he's in the room or not."

"If you imagine I need Sigmund to keep you at arm's length, you underestimate me, Lloyd," she said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to heat up this casserole and eat before Jeremy gets here."

"Ah yes, Jeremy. The other decoy. What have you cooked up to bring him on the scene this time?"

He knows what I'm doing, she thought frantically.

"I didn't 'cook up' anything. We're coleaders of a group therapy session tonight."

"In that dress? I thought group therapy involved punching pillows and venting your anger."

"It's obvious you have lots to learn about psychology," she said icily.

"I learned everything I needed to learn when Jewel and I went through marriage counseling. God, but it was pointless!"

"You may have gotten a poor counselor."

"This one seemed to have trouble with the English language. I told him repeatedly that I didn't love my wife, but he refused to accept it."

"How could you be so certain you didn't love her?"

"I was sure." His tone was cold. "Would you know whether or not you loved someone?"

Why did the question have such an effect on her? She took a deep breath. "Yes, I suppose I would."

"Good." He picked up his magazine once again. "I rest my case."

DESPITE HIS THREAT to circumvent her evasive tactics, Lloyd avoided Stephanie for the next few days. As she drove home from the last day of class before Christmas vacation, she wished herself past the upcoming two weeks. Classes were over until January, and all she had to occupy her were the term papers stacked beside her on the car seat. She couldn't afford to go home this Christmas.

She pulled into her parking space. As she expected, the black motorcycle

was gone. She could spend the afternoon with her term papers.

She plowed through three of them before lifting her eyes with a sigh to gaze at the dripping gray sky. The peal of her doorbell promised a reprieve from the gloom.

"This is the perfect day to curl up with a gorgeous blonde in front of a blazing fire. Look what I brought you." Proudly Jeremy produced two pressed-wood logs wrapped in red-and-black paper.

Stephanie smiled as he followed her into the living room. His happy-go-lucky personality was just what she needed.

"I presume Lloyd's not here?" Jeremy set the logs on the circle of slate under the fireplace.

"No, he works in the lab during the afternoon."

"Good." After coaxing a flame from the two logs, he pulled her next to him on the beige carpet. Stephanie detected a glitter in his pale blue eyes when they traveled from her face to the smooth skin visible above her carelessly buttoned shirt.

"My stocks just went up yesterday," he said.

"That's good." Suddenly the air seemed to go out of her. When she pictured the office space with two consulting rooms, she had trouble imagining Jeremy using one of them. A soft sigh escaped her.

"Don't be discouraged, sweet Stephanie," Jeremy cajoled, his lips just inches from her ear. "The time will pass sooner than you think." He began to nibble past her shirt collar to the sensitive hollow of her throat.

"Jeremy," she pleaded, reaching to intercept his other hand, which was creeping across her thigh.

"Come on, Steph," he murmured against her skin, capturing her hand and holding it down by her side.

"Let me go, Jeremy."

"Hey, we are long overdue for this." His wet lips felt hot against her skin. "How long d'you 'spect me to wait?" Jeremy's voice slurred with passion as he began tugging at the snap of her jeans. She tried to pry his fingers away.

The resounding slam of a door accomplished her goal as Jeremy stiffened apprehensively. Stephanie managed to push him off her and stand up. Lloyd was glowering at the two of them. "I want you to go," she said.

"But—" Jeremy scrambled from the floor, adjusting his belt "—I thought—"

"You'd better leave, Jeremy. Now."

"Hey, if that's the way it is, fine with me." Jeremy edged toward the door, giving Lloyd a conspiratorial glance. "Never can tell about these females, can you? One minute they're ripping your clothes off, the next, they play the role of the soiled virgin."

"Your clothes look intact to me." Lloyd's jaw clenched. "Now I think you'd better go."

"Sure, sure." Jeremy backed toward the door, fumbling for the knob. "Maybe you'll have better luck than I did, pal." His eyes narrowed bitterly as he left.

Suddenly exhausted, Stephanie sank into the smooth coolness of her pine rocker. She felt the beginning surge of tears.

"Did he hurt you?" In an instant he was beside her, crouching next to the rocker. "Stephanie?"

"No," she murmured. "Oh, Lloyd, it was probably all my fault! I've been seeing more of him, and he just naturally thought that—"

"That he could force himself on you?" Lloyd grabbed her shoulders. "Stephanie, no man has the right to do that, no matter what he thinks!" He stood up. "I can't really figure it, Stephanie. You claim to be so involved with him, but you don't want him laying a hand on you. If you were my fiancée, I'd expect a little more than a good-night peck on the cheek."

The idea of an engagement to Lloyd Barclay sent shivers down her spine. "We'll never have a chance to test that one, will we?"

"Marriage isn't one of my favorite institutions."

"So you're content with one casual affair after another, is that it?" Her heart ached with the knowledge that Lloyd rejected marriage so completely.

His eyes held her transfixed. "My affairs are never casual."

*

STEPHANIE slumped dejectedly in her rocker, convinced this would be the worst Christmas of her life. When the entire stack of term papers was graded, she had nothing to erect between herself and her morbid thoughts. She could no longer consider Jeremy as a business partner for her clinic. Without a partner, it would take twice as much in savings before she could begin the project, which meant living in this mingle and building up equity for twice as long. She groaned aloud. She was having trouble holding out against her attraction to Lloyd now—if they

lived together twice as long she'd never be able to resist.

Feeling very sorry for herself, she decided to pour a glass of Jeremy's white wine, which she had been hoarding in the refrigerator for a special occasion. Between sips she fed Sigmund M&M candies as she reviewed her impossible situation. She was very afraid she was falling in love with the man she lived with.

Suddenly the door swung open and the pungent scent of pine needles filled the room.

"Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas!"

Lloyd managed to shove the tree all the way through the door in a shower of needles. Her eyes lingered on his dark hair tousled by the wind. He looked wonderful. His golden eyes sparkled in fun, and she realized she had never seen him like this.

"You look like you were expecting a tree-trimming contest." An assessing gaze took in her gaily colored outfit. "With only two days until Christmas, the lot was practically giving them away."

"It's very beautiful," she said.

Standing there in her red outfit looking at the Christmas tree he had bought—their Christmas tree—she felt a happy warmth building inside her. Maybe she was finally getting the Christmas spirit.

"I have some wassail for after we finish trimming the tree." She nodded toward her empty glass next to the rocker.

Lloyd carried a bundle of wood to the hearth. "But first we'll start a fire," he said, peeling off his corduroy coat. He surveyed the half-burned commercial logs Jeremy had supplied.

"Never did like these darn things," he mumbled.

"Christmas carols!" Lloyd said suddenly, snapping his fingers and jumping to his feet. He disappeared into his bedroom, returning with a portable stereo. Soon Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" chased the last bit of gloom from the apartment.

As they worked to unwind the two strands of lights, Stephanie caught a flurry of red, blue and gold wings from the corner of her eye. "Sigmund!" she cried in sudden apprehension. But it was too late. The large bird landed on the topmost branches like a giant decoration. The flimsy metal stand offered little support for the weight of a forty-inch macaw. The tree toppled as an indignant Sigmund flew screeching back to his perch.

"Lloyd, I'm so sorry," she wailed.

"I'd say that was a perfectly natural reaction on his part," said Lloyd, and Stephanie heard with surprise the friendly understanding in his voice. He brushed her lips gently with his fingertips. She half closed her eyes, expecting his kiss, but it never came.

Side by side they worked in a room lit only by the multicolored glow of the tree lights and the orange blaze of the fire.

"I'm almost done," announced Stephanie, carefully draping another icicle over the tip of a feathery green branch. "Time counts, you know."

"It does?" Lloyd responded in mock anguish. He began flinging handfuls of icicles on his half of the tree.

Laughing, she rushed around the tree and caught his arm. "That looks terrible," she scolded, taking the i-

cles out of his grasp. "I think you just forfeited."

"What about the penalty you get for holding?" He looked significantly at her, his golden eyes sparkling.

"What is it?"

"Just a kiss."

"Oh, is that all?" Standing on tip-toe, she pecked him on the cheek with pursed lips. "There."

"Not quite," he said softly, just before his lips crushed hers. His assault was quick, demanding, and Stephanie felt the floodgates of her pent-up need burst open, filling her with desire. She squirmed against him, wanting him, loving him, impatient at the fabric that separated their yearning bodies.

Gasping, Lloyd wrenched his mouth free and covered her face and throat with tiny nipping kisses. "God, Stephanie, how I want you, have wanted you, ever since I first saw you standing there in that disreputable sweatshirt, belligerent as hell about the prospect of living with me."

"I was afraid, Lloyd," she murmured against his cheek. "I still am."

"Don't be. I won't hurt you." His breath was hot against the hollow of her throat. "Feel what's happening between us, Stephanie."

He placed his hand gently over her breast, his fingers playing tenderly with the hard peak of her nipple. "Tell me you want me, Stephanie." He smiled into her love-glazed eyes.

"I want you, Lloyd," she whispered, "but—"

"No, no more words." He laid a finger lightly over her lips. "No more soul-searching, Stephanie. No promises, no commitments. Just tonight."

His mouth covered hers and he lowered her gently to the carpet. Slowly he

undressed her, exposing her body to his burning gaze.

His sharp intake of breath was the only sound in the stillness as she watched his eyes move over her flushed skin. "This is how I've longed to see you."

He bent his mouth to her breast, nipping playfully at the soft flesh. As he continued to tease the sensitive tip, his hand moved in ever-tightening circles toward the source of her pleasure, and she instinctively arched her hips in invitation.

"Yes," he whispered, his mouth covering hers as his hand sent waves of pleasure through her heated body. Groaning, she fumbled with the buttons of his shirt.

"Lloyd, I want you so," she confessed, helping him slip out of his shirt and trousers.

He smiled down at her as her eyes devoured his strong chest, the tight muscles of his belly, and his jutting manhood, blatantly announcing his desire.

She reached to stroke him, relishing his soft moan of pleasure as he sank beside her. She felt his invasion and rose joyfully to meet it. Moving under him, she grasped his firm buttocks and urged him on. He plunged against her again and again, and she called to him as the pressure building within her finally burst, the sensation carrying her away just as he fell trembling against her, gasping her name.

STEPHANIE AWOKE to the clunk of wood against metal. She sat up and watched Lloyd using one of the unburned logs to rearrange the dying coals in the fireplace. He came toward her on all fours. "I feel like getting

some fresh air. Let's go for a walk along the cliffs."

"Now? It must be three o'clock in the morning."

"Two-thirty, to be exact. Come on. Let's get going before the moon sets!"

"Okay." Impulsively she agreed and ran into her bedroom to don jeans and a warm flannel shirt. She walked back to the living room where Lloyd stood, corduroy jacket in hand.

He held her hand, his fingers laced comfortably through hers as they went down the stairs. Running like children, they crossed the park, pausing at the low rock wall separating the park from the cliffs of the cove. Waves smashed against the cliffs at their feet.

"It must be exciting to scuba dive."

"Yes." His voice surrounded her, rich and warm.

"You've always wanted to be a marine biologist?" she asked.

"I've always wanted to have some kind of career in oceanography."

She pushed on, wanting to know the details of his life. "So you got a scholarship after high school and went right through to your doctorate, never dissuaded from your goal, right?" She pictured a one-track approach to life.

"Not quite." The warm weight of his arm dropped from her shoulder. "I'm a little late in asking, but are you by any chance on the pill?"

"Y-yes, I am," she stammered.

"At least one of us was responsible, then." His words battered her heart. "I guess a fool never learns." His bitterness stopped her in midstride, and she whirled to face him.

Tenderly his thumbs traced and re-traced her cheekbones, and she felt her anger ebb.

"Lloyd... you said that... that 'a fool never learns.'"

She felt him go still, knew when he lifted his head and stared out toward the rolling waves.

"It was a long time ago, Stephanie."

"Please tell me, Lloyd."

"All right." His shoulders sagged a little. She felt his pain, but also something more important—trust.

His words came slowly at first. "It was my senior year in high school. I had big plans for college. I told Jewel all that. I asked her to go on the pill, paid for the doctor visit and the prescription. She even *showed* me the darn things!"

"But she didn't take them?"

"Not even one. She wanted to get married—that's what she told me after she announced she was pregnant. We got married in June."

"And the child?"

He laughed shortly. "She miscarried in July. I should have filed for divorce immediately, but I stayed, kept my job as a low-level manager for a department store, and gave up plans to register for school in the fall. When the second semester came around, she seemed to be in better shape, so I announced I was leaving and going back to school. That's when she really turned on the waterworks, and even offered to go to work herself so I could take a full load of classes."

"Sounds pretty unselfish," Stephanie said.

"I thought so, too. We had a long talk that night, and I told her that after I finished school I wanted to start a family. She agreed."

"Lloyd..." She touched his sleeve and felt him tremble. "Were there children?" She had to know.

"No." Her heart lurched at the regret in his voice. "After I earned my doctorate, she always had a reason why we shouldn't begin a family yet. First we needed a house, then a swimming pool, then a new car. Finally, after she'd had one too many ounces of gin, she admitted she didn't want babies, had never wanted them. The only reason she tried to get pregnant the first time was to land me. She vowed she'd take me to the cleaners financially if I walked out on her. I did, and she did, and the rest you know." He kept his back to her.

"Lloyd, I'm so sorry." Stephanie slipped her arms around his waist. Slowly the tension seeped out of him, and at last he turned in her arms and reached to cup her face in his hands.

"I'm sorry, too, Stephanie. I let that memory invade our happiness tonight." The tangy salt breeze filled her nostrils and lifted the lock of hair from his forehead. Joy surged through her as he traced the line of her upturned nose.

With a throaty chuckle, he captured her smiling mouth with his own, and she answered with an explosion of passion that startled her.

"Slow down a little, huh?" He laughed against her cheek. "How can I take you home with me if I can't even walk?"

Smiling provocatively, she backed away, and they crossed the damp asphalt together.

"Upstairs, you wench!"

The Christmas tree filled the room with its forest scent, and Stephanie

breathed deeply as she walked past the door Lloyd swung open for her.

"I can certainly tell which side of the tree you *threw* your icicles on," she commented dryly.

He stood watching her, hands on hips, his face creased in a deep grin. "This is the same argument my mother and dad had every year. I just realized how much fun they were having all that time."

Stephanie smiled, too, then sobered. "You did say 'had,' not 'have'?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so. Dad died of a heart attack. Mom lasted about two years after that. Why aren't you seeing your parents for Christmas, Stephanie?"

"I couldn't afford to go back." She shrugged. "And they couldn't make it out this year."

"Couldn't or wouldn't?" He paused, his eyes questioning her. "They don't approve of this arrangement, do they?"

"No," she answered unhappily. "They still believe when I live under the same roof with a man I should be married to him." She looked up in shock. "Lloyd, I didn't mean—"

"I know. It's hard to ignore your parents' moral standards. That's one of the reasons I stayed married as long as I did." He walked toward her. "Very seldom do we do things just because we want to do them. That's what makes tonight so special." He drew her into his arms. "We are only pleasing ourselves."

Rising on tiptoe, she curved her fingers around the beard-roughened ridge of his jaw and pulled him toward her, parting her lips as her tongue flicked out to follow the bow of his upper lip.

Her desire grew as she heard him moan softly; then he swept her up in his arms and started for his bedroom, dropping her with a loud plop in the center of the undulating water bed mattress.

"Lloyd!" she shrieked as the warm waves rocked her up and down.

Lloyd toppled next to her on the bed, and she forgot about the movement of the bed as the now-familiar ache spread through her lower body. The mattress swayed gently as Lloyd removed her jeans and her delicate lace briefs.

"I need you," he growled, rolling on top of her and parting her thighs.

When the slow tender rocking began, she was surrounded by shifting warmth, yet anchored by the man she loved. Together they swirled in a vortex of sensation until both uttered a blended cry of triumph.

MORNING LIGHT filtered through pale lashes. Sleepily she rolled over. Her eyes flew open as the bed rolled with her. The water bed! Instantly she remembered, and just as quickly she realized she was alone on the quivering mattress. Awkwardly she climbed over the side of the bed and padded into the living room. Something on the Christmas tree caught her attention, and she walked over to pull a piece of paper from its branches.

"Stephanie," the hastily scrawled note began. "I've gone diving with Sharon. Back this afternoon. See you then, Lloyd."

*

SHE SHOULD have known, she scolded herself bitterly. He *had* said, "No promises; no commitments." Now he

was showing her exactly what he meant. He had no intention of tying himself to someone as he had with Jewel. Hugging her arms tight around her, as if to squeeze the hurt away, she plodded into her bedroom.

"Those tawny eyes!" croaked Sigmund, jumping happily on his perch as she entered the room.

"Oh, Sigmund, how could you," she cried, giving way to tears.

"Pretty Stephanie," the bird squawked hopefully, cocking his head in confusion at his mistress's distress.

She drew a shaky breath and battled the wave of nausea that swept over her.

"You know what I'm going to do, Sigmund?" she announced to the yellow-eyed bird. "I'm going to take the longest, hottest shower in history!"

Shoving her head under the drumming water, she doused her curls before reaching for the bottle of shampoo. Ferociously she worked to remove every trace of his presence, scrubbing his scent from the curve of her throat, cleaning every inch where he had touched her so intimately, so lovingly....

A sob escaped her lips as tears mingled with the steamy water cascading over her body. Damn it! Why did she have to love him? She wished she could be like him, willing to grab the moment, happy to move on to other things when the moment was over. Stephanie stood under the hot spray until her skin glowed pink and the tips of her fingers began to crinkle, but the torment inside her would not dissolve.

"Anybody home?" His cheery greeting froze her hand in the act of turning off the tap. He was back.

"Stephanie?" He pounded on her bedroom door. "Can I come in?"

No, her soul screamed. *Not into my room, not into my life, not into my heart.* "Just a minute, Lloyd. Sigmund's loose in here." Her voice sounded reasonably normal, masked by the still-running water.

"Okay." She could almost see the broad shoulders shrug and turn away. "Have you had lunch?"

"No," she called. Did he expect to come back to her, after spending the morning with Sharon, and take up where he left off? The thought appalled her. Dressing quickly, she ran her fingers through her damp curls before opening the door.

He was lounging against the kitchen counter, munching from a box of crackers. The sight of him there, smiling at her, nearly undid her resolve to put him in his place. Oh, God, she still wanted him. She leaned against the doorjamb, suddenly weak.

His golden eyes slid possessively over her. "You look cute like that, all fresh and damp." He took a step toward her. "I think I'll have you for lunch."

"No!" She backed toward her bedroom.

"What's the matter, Stephanie?" The question came softly.

"Nothing."

"Are you upset because I went scuba diving this morning instead of staying here with you?"

"You have a right to do whatever you want with your time," she replied haughtily. "I wouldn't dream of interfering in whatever you have going with... with Sharon!" she rasped.

He frowned. "Sharon and I have worked together for years," Lloyd

said. "We share the same lab space. She's practically my best friend."

"How marvelous," she flung at him sarcastically. "How is it that you conveniently neglected to tell me about her until after you lured me into your bed?"

"Lured you?"

"And now I suppose you think I won't be able to resist a repeat performance," she interrupted, needing to hurt him. "Well, I'm afraid I wasn't that impressed, so you'll have to make do with Sharon. You probably switch women as quickly as you change clothes."

"I don't think you have any room to talk," he countered, the muscles of his jaw working. "How do I know you don't have a date with Jeremy tonight? As far as I know, you're still 'practically engaged'—" he mimicked her tone "—to the guy."

"Come to think of it," she raged, "going out with Jeremy tonight is a good idea. A very good idea."

"Fine. As long as I can count on you being gone, I'll invite someone for dinner."

She sucked in her breath. He would bring Sharon here? "Don't worry," she whispered hoarsely. "I'll stay out very late."

"Then it's settled. I'm going to buy a couple of steaks and a bottle of wine." In an instant he was gone.

She had no intention of calling Jeremy. He usually spent Christmas in the mountains and wouldn't be in town even if she wanted to see him, which she didn't.

She wondered if Lloyd would build Sharon a fire—and if they'd lie before it, enjoying the cozy warmth of the lighted Christmas tree, the tree she and

Lloyd had decorated so happily together. Would he then take her to his water bed? Would he . . . ? She shoved her fists into her eyes as if to blot out the picture of Lloyd and Sharon together on the rolling bed.

She had to get out of there, figure out somewhere to go for the night. Running to her bedroom, she flipped open the telephone book and thumbed through the motel listings. There. A budget-priced establishment far from ocean views and creamy stretches of beach. Shakily she dialed the number of the motel and made a reservation for a single room.

A GLANCE in her car's rearview mirror next morning revealed a tousle-headed young woman wearing a rumpled yellow-and-white shirt. *I look like hell*, she admitted. Lloyd might well wonder what she had been up to the night before. *Well, let him*, she thought bitterly.

The aroma of grilled tenderloin still hung in the air as Stephanie pushed open the apartment door. She hurried toward her bedroom.

"And just where have you been all night?"

She whirled to find him leaning against the frame of his bedroom door, his rugged face unshaven, his white dress shirt looking as if he had slept in it. The lock of dark hair fell over his forehead, and the lines in his face made him look older than she ever remembered seeing him.

"I don't believe it's any of your business," she replied coolly.

"I considered calling the police, in case something had happened to you." Something—was it pain?—etched itself briefly in his face.

"Your concern is touching."

With an angry growl, he lurched forward, then stopped himself. "Are you, or are you not going to tell me where you were all night?"

She faced him, challenging him with her eyes. "Why should I have to account to you like some—some teenager?" Her voice rose a notch. "How would you like to describe your evening to me? Whatever you are involved in is nobody's business, because you can handle it, right? Well, I can handle my situation, too!"

"That's not the impression I got the other afternoon," he said softly.

Was that concern she heard? She stared at him mutely, wanting to believe he cared, yet distrusting the tiny hope growing in her heart. "I . . . I was safe last night, Lloyd. I'm sorry if I worried you." Tears stemmed by indignant anger threatened to break through at this first sign of tenderness. She spun on her heel. "I'm going to check on Sigmund."

"He's fine." From the corner of her eye she saw him shrug uncomfortably. "I've given him some fruit and changed his water. He . . . he was calling for you, and I thought he might be hungry."

"Th-thank you." She stumbled over the words, thoroughly confused.

He eyed her. "Could . . . could we talk?" He ran nervous fingers through his dark hair.

She sank into her rocker as he paced back and forth in front of the sliding door, feigning great interest in the pounding surf.

"Tomorrow's Christmas," he began, and she realized with a shock he was right. This was Christmas Eve. "Do you think we could declare a truce

for tonight and tomorrow? It seems a shame to be at each other's throats like this, especially since—"

"Since what?" she broke in, irrational hope surging within her.

"I'm leaving on a four-week research trip day after tomorrow."

"What?" It was the last thing in the world she expected him to say, and grief welled in her like hot lava.

He turned toward her, a masked expression on his unshaven face. "I'm heading the team going down to Baja, California. I thought you should know we only have to put up with each other for another day and a half before we get a four-week vacation." He gave her a taut smile.

She avoided his eyes, focusing instead on a point just behind his head. She had to ask, "Will...will...Sharon be going?"

"Yes."

His answer hit her like a blow to her midsection.

"I guess the separation will give us each some time to think about something else."

She tried not to imagine what he was leading up to, tried not to let him see her anguish. "Think about what, Lloyd?"

"Renting my half of the mingle to Sharon."

SHE SLEPT fitfully. Next morning she wrapped her terry robe around her and stumbled out of her bedroom.

"Merry Christmas."

She blinked at Lloyd. A picture of past Christmases, the gay litter of wrapping paper, the hugs from her parents, the smell of turkey roasting, brought a rush of tears to Stephanie's eyes.

Gently he cupped her fingers. "I believe Santa paid us a visit last night."

Stephanie's gaze flew to the Christmas tree, and she noticed a box wrapped in red foil. "Oh, Lloyd... I don't have..."

"It's not for you. It's for Sigmund." His golden eyes twinkled. "You know the one. Kind of short, loud dresser, big mouth." Lloyd disappeared into her bedroom and returned a moment later with Sigmund perched casually on his shoulder. Stephanie had a strange feeling it wasn't the first time the bird had sat there.

Her fingers flew over the taped flaps of the red package. Her gasp mingled with Sigmund's screech as she unveiled package upon package of M&M Peanuts.

Sigmund plummeted from Lloyd's shoulder directly to the box, almost knocking Stephanie over in the process.

Stephanie lifted merry blue eyes to Lloyd's face, but her smile slowly faded as she met the intensity of his gaze.

"Lloyd, I..." She stopped.

A sad smile tipped the corners of his mouth. "Merry Christmas, Stephanie," he said softly. His eyes seemed to memorize her features. The silence between them trembled like fragile tissue paper.

"What time will you be leaving tomorrow?" she asked.

"Early. Before you're up." His eyes searched her face, as if seeking the real question behind the polite one she was asking.

"Oh." She stood awkwardly. "Is there... is there anything you need me to take care of while you're gone?"

His eyes seemed to melt into hers for an instant. "Just yourself."

*

FOUR WEEKS of sleepless nights, of endless soul-searching, had brought Stephanie to the conclusion that she must swallow her pride and try to win his love. She might not get marriage—not after Lloyd's experience with Jewel—but he could learn to love again.

Fresh from her shower and clad in lacy bikini briefs and her new bra, she stood in front of the open closet, pondering what to wear. She wanted to strike the right note, something between indifference and outright provocation.

A sudden screech from Sigmund caused her to whirl. If she had not known better, she would have sworn Sigmund missed Lloyd, too.

Selecting an outfit at last, she slipped it on. The pink color was reflected in her cheeks, she noted with satisfaction as she stood before the mirror.

She loved Lloyd, and somehow she would make him realize that she was right for him, that a commitment to love was not a prison sentence.

Her heart fluttered as she realized he would surely be home soon. In a flash of inspiration, she remembered the firewood. Several sheets of crumpled newspaper later, she finally fanned a wavering flame from one of the smaller logs.

As she started for the kitchen sink to wash her hands, she heard the click of a key, and then Lloyd was standing in the doorway.

"You're home," she choked out.

Something leaped in his golden eyes.

"Yes," he said with a small sigh.

"I... I was starting a fire."

The tiny flame she had nursed so patiently had died. So much for atmosphere.

"Want me to do it?" he offered.

"No, thanks," she answered, smiling grimly. "I like to finish what I start."

"So do I," he said softly, watching her. Stephanie continued to stuff paper under the grate. Before long even the good-size logs crackled merrily.

"That makes a nice picture."

She tried to keep her voice light. "How about some coffee?"

"Sounds good. We can drink it by the fire."

In a few moments they sat cross-legged in front of the leaping flames, each holding a mug of steaming coffee.

Lloyd leaned back to gaze at Stephanie. "It's good to be home," he said quietly. "I've missed you, Stephanie."

"I've missed you, too, Lloyd," she replied honestly, not daring to look at him.

"May I kiss you hello?" His question came softly, hesitantly, yet his eyes smoldered with an emotion that turned her answer into a tiny gasp of surprise. The pressure of his lips was quick, a teasing warmth. He watched her with bright eyes, taunting, daring her to take the next step.

Sliding one hand slowly under the green knit collar of his shirt, she drew him toward her, parting her lips. Her fingers tracing small patterns across the nape of his neck.

Suddenly his arms closed around her. He peppered her face with kisses as he choked out her name again and

again. Joyously she pressed against him.

"Stephanie, these weeks without you have been hell." His hoarse whisper warmed her ear. "I know what we said, but I—"

Stephanie pressed her fingers against his lips. "Shh! You don't have to explain to me now."

"But, Stephanie, what about—"

Again she stopped him. She did not want difficult questions now. Not now. Slowly her fingers crept up under the front of his shirt. She watched his eyes darken with passion as her nails scratched lightly across his chest.

With a groan he swept her into his arms. "Are you sure?" His eyes searched her face.

"I'm sure," she answered with a radiant smile, and he squeezed her tightly to his chest as he carried her into the bedroom.

This time there was no long exquisite exploration of each other; their urgency was too great.

"Stephanie, I want you so much," he rasped as she opened her thighs to receive him.

She watched his face as he thrust into her, watching his eyes shimmer as if with unshed tears. "Oh, Lloyd," she choked, clutching his strong back with her fingers, and feeling him surge deeper.

When he collapsed, shuddering, on top of her, Stephanie wrapped both arms tightly around him. It was going to be all right. And she knew, for the first time in four weeks, that she would be able to sleep all night long.

THE BED was empty when she awoke, and for one terrible moment she feared he had left again. Relief flooded

through her as she heard the clang of a frying pan against the stove burner.

She eased her way out of bed. Lloyd's bathrobe, black silk with red piping down the front, was draped casually over the end of the bed, almost as if he had left it for her. Impulsively she slipped it on.

"Breakfast!" Lloyd called.

"Coming," she called back.

The Sunday paper rested next to her plate. And one of their neighbors was minus two marigold blossoms, judging from the flowers springing jauntily from the neck of a wine bottle filled with water.

They began splitting up the sections of the paper, each of them surprised when they both reached for the gardening pages.

"And we don't even have a place to garden in," said Stephanie.

"I know. I'd like to have a yard one day," Lloyd admitted, and Stephanie allowed herself to dream of planting it with him, spending time together on their hands and knees, up to their elbows in the damp richness of peat moss.

This was how a Sunday morning was supposed to begin, she thought.

*

INSIDE THE grocery store, Lloyd pushed the shopping cart. Stephanie scanned the rows of canned soup for tomato. She glanced over her shoulder, can of soup in hand, and discovered him leaning on the front handle of his cart, studying her intently.

"Can you tell me why I'm running away from the most wonderful woman I've ever known?"

She met his gaze, astonished. He wasn't kidding. His topaz eyes imaled her with fierce intensity.

"You just escaped a very suffocating relationship," she said slowly. Your fears are perfectly natural."

"And they're hurting you, aren't they?"

"Yes." She dropped her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Stephanie. I promised once I wouldn't do that." He shoved his cart forward impatiently, then topped, rapping the handle thoughtfully with his knuckles. "Damn," he said softly, keeping his back to her.

LOYD GREW more quiet the closer they got to the apartment. When he made no attempt at conversation while they cut away the groceries, Stephanie knew something was wrong.

"I'm going diving with Sharon this afternoon," he said at last. "I made the arrangements yesterday. Do you want me to cancel them?"

Of course, you fool! But then I'll confirm your fears that I'll suffocate you. "No, that's silly, Lloyd. Go ahead."

"Would you like to go along? Sharon and I could teach you the fundamentals."

"No thanks." Her voice sounded strangled to her own ears, but she prayed it had a degree of normalcy. "I doubt if I'd be very good at it, anyway."

"Well...if you're sure..." He sounded genuinely disappointed.

When he left, she was in her room. She opened the cage door and the large bird climbed out. "Oh, Sigmund, what am I going to do? Just when I thought everything was going so well, he runs off to go scuba diving with her. How

can I—" She paused as an idea slowly formed. She gazed out her sliding door to the cove. Somewhere, under its turquoise surface, Lloyd and Sharon were together. She had to enter that world, too, if she expected to capture Lloyd's heart.

THROUGH CAREFUL planning, Stephanie managed to keep Lloyd at a distance for a few days. She scheduled her lessons in the evening, mumbling something to Lloyd about counseling sessions with clients. When she got home late each night, she had no trouble sounding tired, and Lloyd seemed to accept her lack of interest in love-making.

One day soon she would surprise Lloyd with her new knowledge. Until that day came, she wanted to avoid his bed.

The week flew past, and she awoke to a sunny Saturday morning. Lloyd clanked through the door just before noon, his dripping diving gear under his arm.

"Hi!" His broad grin registered pleasure at seeing her.

"Have a good time in the cove?" She hated herself for asking.

"Sure did. I wish you'd change your mind and try it with us sometime, Stephanie." His chiseled features took on a boyish eagerness. "Sharon is such a pro at it, and I'm sure she could teach you in no time. You'd really like her, and I'm anxious for you two to get to know each other—"

"Well, I'm not!" She stood up abruptly, amazed that he would suggest that she become buddies with Sharon. "I'm not sure what kind of person you think I am, but I have absolutely no intention of letting Sharon

teach me to scuba dive. I think it's wonderful that you're so casual about all this—" her voice began to quiver in spite of her efforts to control it "—but I'm just not that loose, I guess!"

"I'm not ready to be tied down again, Stephanie. I thought you understood."

"Intellectually, perhaps. But emotionally, I've got big problems when it comes to Sharon. Sometimes I don't want to have anything more to do with you, Lloyd Barclay! Now, if you'll pardon me, Sigmund needs me." She turned away from him, but he caught her arm before she stepped out of his reach.

"So do I," he said, his voice low and menacing. "And I've been very patient all week with a woman who had no time for me. I've asked no questions about the fact you've been out every night. I told myself to wait until this weekend. Now you behave as if I were the lowest thing on earth. What's gotten into you, Stephanie? Where's the warm passionate woman who melted into my arms last weekend?"

She was livid with rage. "All you require of me is my presence in your bed. I satisfy some of your needs, and Sharon satisfies others, is that it? And you use us both, without making any commitments to either one. I used to think I hated Sharon, but I've changed my mind. I feel sorry for her." She spit the words at him, wanting to hurt him.

"All right, Stephanie." His voice chilled her with its cold impersonal tone. "I've kidded myself that you could give me time to work this out. I told myself your psychology training might even help. But we can't live together, gouging at each other until

there's nothing left. I'll talk to Sharon see if she's ready to move in."

"And I'm supposed to accept that with no complaint? Maybe I don't want to live with your girlfriend Lloyd."

"Do you have a better alternative?" he challenged quietly.

"I guess I don't." She sighed. Slowly she walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

THE TELEPHONE was ringing the next day as she entered the apartment. She jerked the receiver from its resting place.

"Hello?"

"Stephanie?"

She frowned in confusion, not recognizing the well-modulated tone of the woman on the other end. "Yes, this is Stephanie."

"This is Sharon. Lloyd said I could come over tonight and meet you, if it's okay."

*

HATING HERSELF for even caring about her appearance, Stephanie stood before her full-length mirror. The pale blue knit dress clung softly to the gentle curves of her small-boned figure. She slipped her stocking feet into the gray suede pumps she saved for those times when she wanted to radiate elegance. This was one of those times.

"Stephanie?" Lloyd's voice sounded through the door.

"Yes?"

"Are you about ready? Sharon should be here any minute."

She opened the door. "I'm ready."

She felt her cheeks flush under his rankly admiring stare. "All this for Sharon?" he questioned softly.

"Oh, no," she said airily. "I'm meeting someone later."

The light in his golden eyes faded. "Jeremy, no doubt," he said.

"I don't think that's any of your business."

She saw a brief flash of pain. "No, guess—"

The urgent peal of the doorbell sliced through his sentence, and Stephanie took a deep breath.

He held her eyes for a moment, then turned toward the entryway. Stephanie braced herself to face her rival.

"Stephanie, this is Sharon McLeil." Lloyd introduced them smoothly, as if they were meeting at a cocktail party. "Sharon, this is Stephanie Collier."

Stephanie mumbled something polite as she held out her hand to the tall slender blonde standing uncomfortably before her. *She doesn't want to be here any more than I want her to be*, he saw with sudden clarity. All at once Stephanie knew what she had to do.

"Why don't we sit in the living room?" She felt astoundingly calm. "We could all have a drink, and—" he paused, snapping her fingers as if remembering something. "Lloyd, I forgot to make a new tray of ice, and we don't have much left. Would you consider running to 7 Eleven and picking up a bag so we can have a drink?"

He shot her a questioning look, then shrugged. "I'll get my helmet and keys." At the door he paused. "I'll be right back," he said, concern in his golden eyes. He slowly closed the door.

"You wanted to get rid of him." Sharon eyed her with curiosity. "Why?"

"Because I just figured out who the fly in the ointment is here, and it's not you, it's me."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Wouldn't it make more sense if you rented my half of the mingle, Sharon?" Stephanie asked gently.

"Why?" Sharon frowned, perplexed.

"Oh, come on, Sharon." Stephanie became slightly irritated. "I've known for quite a while that you and Lloyd have a thing going. So why don't you just rent from me? It would solve everything."

"Not quite."

"Why not?"

Sharon paused. "Because it's not me Lloyd wants. He's in love with you." Stephanie opened her mouth to protest, but Sharon waved her to silence. "After Lloyd's divorce, we dated for about a year. I was head over heels—I won't deny it—but something didn't click with Lloyd. He told me it wasn't going to work. Fortunately, we've been able to remain friends. I've started dating other people. I hope someday to find someone as terrific as Lloyd who will happen to think I'm terrific, too."

Stephanie felt a rush of sympathy for this suddenly very fragile-looking woman. "If that's the case," she ventured, "then what is going on with this renting business?"

"Lloyd's been attracted to you from the beginning, but he's had to battle his old suspicions about women every step of the way. You were the most important thing in the world to him, he said,

and you'd told him you didn't want anything more to do with him."

"That true. I said that," Stephanie confirmed softly.

"Well, he wants to change your mind, without the tension of living together. Sort of an old-fashioned courtship is what he has in mind. I'm also supposed to find out how involved you are with this Jeremy fellow. He's worried about that a lot." She stopped speaking, but it took Stephanie several seconds to recover from the impact of Sharon's words and close her mouth, which hung open in astonishment through the recitation.

"I haven't been seeing Jeremy for some time. He's no longer in the picture."

"And how do you feel about Lloyd?"

"I'm afraid I love him, Sharon."

"Thank God for that." Sharon sighed. "I think you two can make it, but you'd better have a good long talk, maybe several long talks."

"About what?" Lloyd's overly cheerful voice cut into their conversation as he came through the door and dropped the bag of ice cubes with a noisy rattle into the sink.

"Everything," answered Sharon, standing up. "And I'm going to leave you two alone so you can get started."

"You're not leaving?" Panic seemed to grip Lloyd for a moment.

"Lloyd, it's up to you, now." She left quickly.

As soon as the door closed, Stephanie leaped indignantly from her chair. "You were going to have her spy on me!" The sheepish look on his face melted her anger like sun on a snowbank. She glanced at him shyly. "Jeremy and I are finished. Have been for

some time. We never were a very hot item in the first place, actually."

Concern clouded his brow. "Then if you weren't out with Jeremy all night just before Christmas, then who?"

She laughed. "I rented a budget motel room that night, Lloyd. I stayed by myself."

"You crazy—" His soft voice reached for her, even before his arm closed around her. "And I paced the floor, waiting for you to get home."

"Good morning, Stephanie," Sigmund croaked.

"I can't imagine life without the bird." Lloyd's golden eyes smiled down at Stephanie. "Or without his curly-headed owner."

She searched his face, needing to reassure herself of his feelings. "Lloyd I have been possessive about you, but I can't change that. I have to know there's no one else."

"There's no one else, Stephanie." His eyes looked directly into hers. "Sharon is only a friend, nothing more."

"I offered to rent her my half of the mingle." Stephanie stirred inside the circle of his arms. "I thought that would make you happy."

He threw back his head as he rocked her in his arms. "I love you, Stephanie Collier, and I want to marry you."

"You do?" She stared at him in wonder.

He laughed, a joyful sound. "That's not the proper response," he said kissing her eyes closed. "You're supposed to say, 'I love you, too, and accept your proposal.'"

"Of course I love you, but—"

"No 'buts' are allowed after that statement." He bent his head to nibble one earlobe.

"Lloyd," she persisted, trying to maintain her train of thought as his tongue explored the inner curve of her ear. "You're still making payments to one wife. Are you sure you want a second one? We can live together, like before. You don't have to—"

"Let me clear up a few things," he said, tilting her chin with one finger to look deeply into her eyes. "First, I understand Jewel is getting married again, so the payments should be ending. But even if they weren't, I still would want to marry you. All this time I've been fighting a commitment which already existed. Oh, Stephanie," he murmured against her cheek. "I want us to be married, to have children, to build our careers together. I want a lifetime, Stephanie. Can you give me that?"

She leaned back against his arms, wanting him to see the love in her eyes when she answered.

"Yes."

They closed the distance between them, their lips touching, sealing the promise they each made. She heard him moan softly against her mouth before pulling away to nuzzle her ear.

"All those little buttons on your dress are driving me crazy." He ran a finger down the row of tiny fastenings.

With maddening slowness he unfasted button after button, his lips following the trail blazed by his fingers.

"Lloyd?" She traced the outline of his beard-stubbed jaw.

"Mmm?" His dark lashes fluttered.

"Let's sell the mingle."

"Sell it? After all this?"

"I've just had the most marvelous idea." Her voice sparkled with eagerness. "If we bought a house, why couldn't I start my clinic in a part of it? Then I wouldn't need a partner to help pay rent, and I could have flexible office hours, and..." She looked anxiously at Lloyd. "Would you mind something like that?"

He smiled at her, his eyes golden with love. "I think it's a super idea, Stephanie. And with the sale and the prospect of Jewel getting married, we might be able to afford a place by the ocean."

"And a yard. Don't forget the yard."

"And a yard," Lloyd agreed, lightly teasing the tip of her breast to arousal. "Although for the life of me I don't know when I'll have time to work in the yard, with all the distractions in the master bedroom." He lowered his dark head to nibble gently at the taut peak. "I think I want to postpone this discussion until later," he crooned.

"Me, too," she whispered, lost to any reality but his touch.

"Good morning," croaked a familiar voice.

Lloyd's head jerked up.

"That bird has incredible timing," muttered Lloyd, burrowing against Stephanie's breast. "I'll tell you another thing our house is going to have."

"What's that?" questioned Stephanie languidly.

"A separate bedroom for Sigmund."






ROSALIND CARSON

Lovespell



Blythe knew that Michael Channing's offer to let her sing in his club was genuine . . . but he also didn't hide the fact that he wanted her . . . fervently.



Blythe was almost blinded when she looked down at the wedding party on the terrace steps. It was a blessing to see sunshine after the two weeks of storms that had buffeted San Diego's shores. Julie and Russell had exchanged their wedding rings, she noted. There was a ripple of chords from her twin brother, David's, guitar. She put all the expression and beauty she could into her singing—her gift for Julie and Russ.

She noticed that Julie was wiping tears from her eyes. Russ's eyes were also suspiciously moist. The bridesmaids were tearful. She happened to glance at the best man. *His* eyes were totally dry. Narrowed. Admiring. How dark his eyes were. They didn't shine like other people's. They gleamed, giving him a slightly devilish air that was matched by his crooked smile. His smile seemed too intimate, too knowing. Blatant sexuality seemed to surround him like an aura. She could imagine him as 007, casually piling chips on a roulette table, or a diamond thief who burgled only the best houses. He *looked* experienced. Dangerous.

He was staring, boldly, relentlessly. As she sang the final words of the song, Blythe felt a pulse start up in her throat. Her fingers were trembling and heat was spreading through her whole body. Embarrassment, she wondered. No, not embarrassment. Awareness. *Sexual* awareness.

Blythe was soon surrounded by guests, all of them extravagant in their compliments. She knew the precise moment when the elegantly lean man began to shoulder his way easily through the throng.

"Your voice should be classified as a secret weapon," he said when he reached her. The group broke up, as though the man's intimate tone had warned them away. "You do realize you reduced everyone to tears?"

"Except for you," she responded tartly, taking refuge in sarcasm.

"But your voice reached my heart." He laughed shortly. "I'd forgotten I had a heart. Thank you for reminding me."

The band started playing and Blythe suddenly realized that they were standing on the dance floor. Before she could protest, the stranger pulled her into his arms. Close up, the man's dark gaze had an almost hypnotic intensity. She couldn't look away, and fiery little darts of sensation were playing havoc with her nervous system. With an effort, she moved back a step. "You're a friend of Russ's, aren't you?" she said. "I don't believe I caught your name?"

He lifted her hand in his, his thumb rubbing lightly, intimately over her palm. His crooked smile was whimsical. "I'm Prince Charming, of course," he said evenly. "Don't tell me you didn't recognize me? I'm here to awaken you from your hundred years'

sleep and take you off to my castle to live happily ever after."

It was such an impossibly hackneyed approach that Blythe couldn't stop herself from smiling. "What makes you think I've been sleeping?" she asked lightly.

The line bracketing the corner of his mouth deepened. "No one who'd ever been properly awakened could look so virginal."

Blythe swallowed. This was going too far. "I don't believe in fairy tales," she got out at last.

"I know." His voice was grave, but his dark eyes danced with light. "I intend to change that," he said. Then he added, "We've met before."

"We have?"

His hand was clasping hers tightly, and now he raised it to his lips. She felt the butterfly-tender touch of his mouth on her fingers reverberating down to her toes.

"In some faraway land and time. We danced in the castle courtyard." His lips grazed her fingers. "Camelot. When the music ended," he continued softly, "we went to our castle bedroom and I coaxed you into freeing your golden hair from that so-practical braid. When it tumbled around your shoulders as nature meant it to do, I lifted the silken weight of it in both my hands, and then I kissed that mouth of yours that looks as though it were made for kissing. And then we danced again until the sun rose and set and rose once more." He was looking at her as if he could see all the way inside her.

Her boyfriend's stiffly smiling face suddenly loomed up beside them. "May I?" Craig asked politely, and she realized the music had started.

The man released her at once, and she stumbled, disoriented by the abrupt transition from fantasy to reality. With an effort, Blythe forced her light brown gaze to Craig and saw that his usually clear gray eyes were the slaty color of a stormy sea.

"I'm sorry, Craig," she said hastily. "I couldn't find you, and Mr., er, Mr. —"

"Charming," the man supplied under his breath.

"That isn't really your name," Blythe objected.

"Michael Channing, then, if you insist." He gave her a funny sort of salute. Then he turned abruptly and strode toward the steps.

"What the hell were you doing with that man?" Craig demanded. "You know who he is, don't you? He owns all those restaurants, five or six of them at least. Chez Michel, the Dockside, Michael's on the Pier. . . ."

That Michael Channing. She'd pointed out his restaurants to tourists countless times.

"You must have read about his divorce," Craig continued. "It was in all the papers a couple of years ago. A really sweet woman, kind of innocent. That's why it bothered me when you—"

"I'm sorry, Craig," she said softly. "You're quite right. He was much too suggestive." She paused. "Shouldn't we pay our respects to the bride and groom?"

Craig nodded, and they walked up the steps together. Julie and Russ were beginning to cut the cake.

It was over an hour before Blythe saw him again. Then he was suddenly hovering on the edge of the crowd of guests as they pressed close to the

ride. There was a sudden squeal of laughter as Julie tossed her bouquet over her shoulder. She had thrown it so high, and it bounced off one edge of the stone fountain and was fielded effortlessly and automatically by Michael Channing. He looked at it bemusedly for a moment as everyone applauded. Then he straightened. Oblivious to the amused glances that followed him, he marched straight toward Blythe. No, he thought, panic-stricken.

He was in front of her. "For you, Sleeping Beauty," he murmured. "We'll dance again," he said quietly, so quietly that Craig didn't seem to hear. But Blythe heard.

*

BLYTHE AND DAVID'S parents had died five years previously, when the captain of their rented yacht had ventured too far from Pago Pago in rough weather. It had often seemed to Blythe that her parents' deaths had been symbolic of the way they'd lived. Sailing happily through life, madly in love with each other, they had insisted, in spite of John Sherwood's erratic income as a realtor, that they and their children wear only clothes created by top designers, dine only on gourmet foods. They had constantly missed disasters such as bouncing checks, repossessed furniture and even bankruptcy by the breadth of a hair.

All the Sherwoods had left their wins were memories of two beautiful people, a house that was mortgaged to its last wrought-iron gatepost and a staggering array of past-due bills.

Determined to finish college, David and Blythe had faced the necessity of working for the first time in their lives. The tour business had been their friend

Craig's idea. He'd recommended both Blythe and David to the tour company he worked for. The last two years at school had been a real struggle, but they'd made it.

By the time David and Blythe received their diplomas, Craig had worked out the details of the business they would share and had arranged for financing by a banker uncle. Wanderlust Tours had been born. The three of them took turns either driving, or working in their tiny office, which was on San Diego's historic and popular waterfront strip.

"Better to be in an accessible spot," Craig had decreed, "even if it means having less space."

David, as a history major, delighted in learning as much as he could about their tour area. Craig, who'd majored in business and management, was their senior partner. Blythe, who'd planned to major in music but had hastily switched to business, kept the books, but also took her turn as guide because she enjoyed the break from office routine.

Several days after Julie's wedding, she was describing to an elderly husband and wife from Indiana the tour she would be conducting to Tijuana's colorful bazaars, when she had the spine-tingling feeling someone was watching her. Turning, she saw Michael Channing. He looked every bit as rakish and darkly attractive in a tan safari shirt and well-pressed slacks as he had in a tuxedo. She felt jittery, and she couldn't seem to concentrate.

After a few minutes of deliberation, the elderly client finally pulled out his wallet and counted out the necessary amount.

As soon as the door closed behind the old couple, Michael seated himself in the chair opposite Blythe's desk. He gave her a deliberately suggestive smile. "Makes you believe in fate, doesn't it?"

"Why are you here?"

"I'm here to book a tour, of course."

"You just happened to pick on Wanderlust Tours?"

The comma-shaped line beside his mouth deepened. "Not at all."

"We have several tours," she said briskly. "One to the zoo, Sea World, the Wild Animal Park—"

"How about the city tour that ends up in Tijuana?"

"You've never been to Tijuana?"

"There's that disbelieving tone again."

"Did you have a particular date in mind?" she asked. "We run that tour on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"It's Thursday tomorrow."

There was a glint in his dark eyes that was beginning to unnerve her. "You didn't really just happen to come in here, did you?" she accused.

He grinned wickedly, then spread both palms in a gesture of surrender. "I confess. I've looked in here every day since the wedding, but I was unrewarded until today. Here you are, so here I am."

"Why?"

A devilish expression appeared on his lean face. "Surely that's obvious," he said.

Somehow she managed to recover her brisk office voice. "I'm not sure there's a vacancy."

"Now, now, Blythe. And I would suggest you don't decide to switch tours with one of your cohorts," he

remarked lightly. "I'd just have to cancel and keep trying until I get the guide of my choice."

"I suppose if you have nothing better to do, you might as well waste your time playing games." She was proud of the disinterested note in her voice.

He was smiling. Didn't anything faze him? "So cool," he said admiringly. "You are absolutely, impossibly beautiful and I don't remember when I've ever wanted any woman as much."

She looked at him uncertainly, totally bereft of words.

Once more he leaned across the desk, standing now. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

BLYTHE HAD expected Craig to be annoyed the next morning that Michael Channing had signed up for her tour, but she hadn't expected him to be furious. "He's obviously marked you down as his next victim," he said heatedly as he read the day's schedule.

"The man's a shark, a barracuda. He changes women every week or two, although usually they're older women."

She sighed with exasperation. "Okay," she admitted. "It looks as though Michael Channing has designs on me. But he's a paying customer, and he's done nothing to give us the right to refuse to take him."

"I could take the Tijuana run."

"I don't think..." She hesitated. "I'm quite capable of handling Michael Channing," she said instead.

Craig's gray eyes clouded. "I could make it an order, you know. I am the senior partner in this enterprise."

"You've never pulled rank before."

"I've never had reason to before."

He was standing very straight, looking grimmer than she'd ever seen him.

"It's just that I... I care about you, Blythe."

"And I care about you." Would Craig ever get around to saying "I love you," she wondered. He surely knew by now that she wasn't out to trap him into marriage.

He smoothed his hair, then met her light brown eyes, smiling in his usual affectionate way. She laughed. "What a fuss about nothing," she said lightly. "I'll see you later, okay?"

She went out into the heat of the morning, glad that she and Craig had been able to part on amicable terms. But her smile faded as she rounded the corner and saw Michael Channing leaning against the side of the silver-and-blue minibus that she would be driving.

It's only one day, she told herself. By the end of it, she'll have convinced Michael Channing he was not about to add another scalp to his list of conquests, and then she could relax back into her usual well-ordered, serene life.

Unfortunately, even as she thought this, Michael favored her with a wicked sidelong smile that turned her bones to jelly and her brain to mush. She had a premonition that the day was going to be even more difficult than she'd imagined.

ONCE SHE got everyone to Tijuana she turned them loose to shop in the assortment of Spanish-style shops and modern international stores.

Unfortunately Michael Channing refused to be turned loose. "How about a beer?" he suggested as everyone else piled out.

"I'll be having coffee, but you are free to find a *taberna*."

He nodded, but when she rounded the bus to lock it, he was waiting for her. Blythe sighed. "There's a *hosteria* at the end of this block that I usually go to for coffee," she said, surrendering. "You can get beer there."

He fell into step beside her, opening the door for her when they reached the building. "*Carta blanca, por favor*," Michael told the waiter as he seated them.

The waiter nodded and glanced shyly at Blythe with velvety brown eyes as she ordered her coffee.

Michael studied her, a strange expression on his face. "Why do you dislike me, Blythe?" he asked.

Luckily the waiter arrived with their drinks and she had a moment to compose an answer. "I don't dislike you, Michael," she said crisply. "It's just that you come on too strong."

"I see." His dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "A change of tactics is called for, obviously," he murmured.

"No 'tactics,'" she began, but she was interrupted by the arrival of a pair of children who had evidently come to entertain. The boy was about eight. The little girl, probably his sister, was no more than five. The boy carried a guitar. Neither of them wore shoes.

The boy's playing was surprisingly skillful, but both piping voices were a little off-key. Everyone applauded just the same, and the boy took off his sombrero and went around collecting. Michael waved a twenty-dollar bill at him and he approached rapidly, eyes fixed on the money. Bending down, Michael whispered to both children for a minute. The children swapped a conspiratorial glance and then looked expectantly at Blythe.

"I've told them you'd like the boy to play again so you can sing," Michael said.

"I'm not going to do anything of the sort," Blythe said hotly.

The children's large dark eyes were still fixed on her. "No song, no money for them," Michael said.

"You couldn't be so cruel," she protested.

He leaned forward, smiling. "Hummor me, please," he murmured.

She forced her gaze away from his face and glanced at the children, then couldn't look away from their eyes. The boy was staring at the twenty-dollar bill. "Oh, all right," Blythe said wearily.

The money transferred itself to the boy's jeans pocket with the speed of light. "*Vaya Con Dios*," she told him, then picked up the little girl and seated her on her lap. The children hummed along as she sang.

There was a great deal of applause when the song was finished, not only from the *hosteria* patrons, but from a small crowd of onlookers who had gathered on the sidewalk outside. The little girl snuggled warmly in her lap, and Blythe couldn't resist kissing the petal-soft cheek before releasing her. Michael smiled at her warmly.

"Did you ever think of singing professionally?" he asked after the children left.

Still bemused by the music and the charm of the children, Blythe answered honestly. "I used to dream about it. Fantasizing, you know?" She was silent for a moment, caught up in the memory of how desperately she'd once wanted to pursue a career in music.

She became aware that Michael was watching her closely, that her expression must have mirrored her thoughts. She shook her head, causing her long blond braid to sway. "Few people can make an adequate living from singing. It's too chancy."

"You're perfectly happy guiding tours?"

She frowned. "I enjoy it. And we have plans for expansion. Craig thinks we can employ someone else this year if everything continues to go well."

"This Craig of yours," he said abruptly. "Where exactly does he fit in?"

"We're sort of unofficially engaged," she said, thinking even as she spoke that she should be more precise.

"How long has this unofficial engagement gone on?"

She smiled reminiscently, feeling on much safer ground. "I've known Craig since high school. He was a couple of years ahead of my brother, David, and me, and I hero-worshiped him, I guess. But he didn't really notice me in school. He was more David's friend." She hesitated. "He was wonderful to me when my parents died. He took care of practically everything."

"And now you have your life together all planned out." He sighed deeply. "I guess I'm going to have to save you from yourself, Blythe Sherwood."

"I don't need saving," she said through gritted teeth. "I'd better be getting back to the bus." Awkwardly, she stood up.

"You're closing me out again," he said, also getting up. His voice was regretful.

She looked at him, then wished she hadn't. He had a way of making eye

contact and holding it so that she couldn't possibly look away.

"You wouldn't really have held out on the children if I'd refused to sing, would you?" she asked.

He shook his head, smiling faintly. "I love children too much to treat them badly." Then he looked solemn again. "I'd like to talk to you sometime soon," he said.

"Haven't we been talking?"

"I have a proposition for you. A *business* proposition. Tomorrow? At Chez Michel? Shall we say, seven o'clock? This is strictly business, I assure you."

His expression was serious, and it surprised her when she found herself telling him yes.

BLYTHE COULDN'T remember when she'd enjoyed a meal so much. The restaurant was attractive. It had the fresh and airy ambience of a contemporary European café, complete with plants and tubs of bright flowers. Added to this was a commanding view of the harbor.

As she sipped her coffee, she gradually became aware that every head in the place was turning toward their table.

"Is this the chick?" She turned, astonished, as a wiry Filipino with a mop of black ringlets dropped an arm around her shoulders and grinned at her with apparent approval. She recognized him at once. Domingo. Now she understood the stares. His group, Temptation, played three nights a week in the Starlight Room at Chez Michel. The *San Diego Union* had written him up a month or so ago, calling the group "powerful, dynamic, a must-see."

He spoke not to her but to Michael. "You were right, man. She's decorative. The question is, can she sing?"

"She can sing," Michael replied.

The young man leaned one elbow on the table and looked at her intently. "We play everything from country ballads to rock and disco. Can you cut it?"

She looked so bewildered, he turned to Michael, who was laughing. "Take it easy, Dom," Michael said. "Blythe doesn't know yet that I asked you to come in to meet her."

Domingo glanced from Michael to Blythe. "Like that, is it?" he said, then patted Blythe's hand. "Let's start over. You're a singer, right?"

She nodded.

"What kind of songs you sing?"

"Every kind," she faltered. "Rock, country, folk, blues."

"Now we're getting some kind of place. You're going to sing for me tonight like Mr. Channing arranged. He's never tried to influence me before, so you must have something. And he's offering you what money can't buy—the chance to sing with the greatest."

"I hadn't realized you were so modest," Michael murmured.

Blythe couldn't prevent a spurt of laughter.

"Modesty doesn't get you anywhere in this trade," Domingo remarked. He straightened and stood up, looking down at her. "We've got twenty minutes before you'll be in front of a live audience, so what do you say? You want to go for it?"

Afterward she couldn't remember saying anything to Domingo at all. She just remembered Michael standing up, beaming like a magician who'd pro-

duced a dove when everyone expected a rabbit.

She found herself in front of the microphone, marveling at the full rich sound of her own voice as it came back to her through the monitor after it had passed through the amplifiers. The group had the best PA equipment she'd ever heard.

The audience loved them—that was obvious. There were a lot of requests, occasionally for one of the songs the group had written. Not knowing the words, she harmonized while Domingo and another band member sang. She felt she could go on all night.

The set was almost over when she noticed Michael. He was standing at the back of the room watching her. When he caught her gaze he smiled and gave her a little salute with two fingers. She felt a response that was so strong it was almost tangible.

NOBODY LEFT until the lounge closed at 1:00 a.m. In spite of the late hour, Blythe didn't feel tired. She felt as though she were flying, soaring upward toward some distant star.

Domingo placed one foot on the chair next to her and leaned his elbow on one knee. "You should wear more makeup, you know. Those lights..." He grinned over her head. "What you think of her performance, man?"

Michael's voice answered him. "I think I'd prefer to hear what you think."

Domingo nodded several times, then said, "Rehearsal, seven tomorrow. Okay?"

"You're offering me a singing job with Temptation?" Amazement made her voice squeak.

"No, I want you to scrub the stage," he replied. "Of course I'm talking about singing. Couple of weeks trial, find out how the audience reacts. Then we see. Three weekends, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Two-hour rehearsals before, one or two hours the rest of the week. We have to teach you how to move. What you think?"

"You really think I can sing?"

Domingo looked over her head at Michael again. "I can't make this chick out." He looked at Blythe. "You want the job or not?"

"I want it, I'd love it, but..." Sanity was beginning to prevail. "I have a business, responsibilities. I can't possibly..."

Domingo straightened and started to walk away. "You make up your mind by tomorrow," he threw over his shoulder. Then he turned around. "You got the kind of voice the microphone loves," he said magnanimously. "All I got to do is teach you how to use it." He paused. "You decide to turn up, wear this color." He touched the collar of his hot-pink shirt. "And more makeup," he added as he went out.

Michael turned the chair next to Blythe around and straddled it. Blythe stared at him, feeling very much as though she'd been hit over the head with a two-by-four. "It's impossible, Michael. I have to do two tours tomorrow and again Sunday. Weekends are our busiest times."

"You could try it for a couple of weeks."

"No, I can't. Craig would—"

"He wouldn't approve?"

"Well, of course he'll be delighted I've been offered such a chance," Blythe said slowly. "But—"

"What time does your tour get in tomorrow?"

"Four-thirty, but that's not the point."

He was looking at her levelly. "I think I'll call you Daisy," he said abruptly.

Blythe blinked. "'Daisy'?" she echoed blankly.

"When I was a kid I had a gerbil named Daisy." He smiled reminiscently. "Odd creatures, gerbils. I guess she was happy in her cage, because whenever I encouraged her to come out of it she'd huddle back in a corner and twitch her whiskers until I closed the door." His dark glance challenged her.

"But I'm hardly in a cage."

"Aren't you?" He stood up, his expression unreadable. "Come on, I'll take you home."

In the parked car she looked at his averted profile. Was he angry? "I'm sorry, Michael, really. I'd love to do it, but I have to be realistic."

After a few minutes of silence, she saw the white flash of his smile. "Still hiding, aren't you, Daisy?" he teased, and she realized he hadn't been fuming as she'd thought, but plotting his next attack.

"I'm not," she said hotly. "I realize fabulous opportunities like this don't come along every day. Domingo is fantastic—"

Michael gripped her shoulders. "You loved it up there. You came alive. I saw you. Take a chance. Just once in your life, don't be afraid to take a chance. This is *your* chance. Don't turn your back on it."

Then he leaned toward her, and his mouth came down hard on hers, stealing her breath. His lips moved as

though to force a response from her by insisting, demanding. . . .

And she *was* responding. Behind her closed eyelids, lights exploded in cascades of color like slowly falling stars. Her blood seemed to have been replaced by a wild, honeyed sweetness that flowed through every part of her, a sweetness that began and ended in Michael's mouth.

Afterward she had no way to gauge how long their kiss had lasted. A minute, two, infinity. Nor could she remember who ended it. She remembered only the caressing sound of Michael's voice murmuring, "Blythe, darling," and feeling that she wanted to cry with gladness at the tenderness in it.

A long time later, it seemed, he lifted his head and looked at her. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes were ebony bright. Then with the low sigh of a man awakening from a dream, he said, "I suppose I'd better get you home, or you won't have enough energy to sing tomorrow." There was a definite note of mischief in his voice now. "You are going to do it, aren't you?"

"I'm going to think about it," she told him.

IT WAS PAST TWO in the morning. Carefully Blythe removed her key from the lock and closed the apartment door.

"Where the hell have you been?" Craig demanded.

"You won't believe the answer," Blythe said lightly. She turned to David, mostly to avoid the accusing look in Craig's eyes. "You'll never guess, Dave. You know Domingo, the guitarist? He's asked me to sing with him and his group, Temptation. For a couple of

weeks. In the Starlight Room. That's what I've been doing tonight, singing."

She turned to face Craig. "Domingo liked my voice, Craig. Can you imagine? He said the microphone loved me."

"Hey, all right," David exclaimed. "You really sang tonight? In front of an audience? What did you sing?"

"Everything." She laughed. "Well, not quite everything. The group has a lot of stuff I don't know, but Domingo's offered to rehearse me."

"It's only a two-week trial," she said hastily, "and I could take the shorter tours those days, couldn't I? And fit the rehearsals in. If I decide to go ahead, that is."

Craig sat down heavily on the arm of the sofa and touched her cheek with one hand. "You really want this, don't you?" he said wonderingly. One corner of his mouth twitched a little, but in a grimace, not a smile. "Does Michael Channing have anything to do with this fabulous offer?"

She flinched inwardly and at once felt tremendously guilty. "He arranged the audition, yes," she said carefully. "Wasn't that kind of him?" She could hear the false note in her words. She was trying too hard to make the whole thing sound innocent. "I'm supposed to wear hot pink if I take the job. Can you see me in hot pink?"

He tilted his head, considering. "It will match your cheeks," he said. "I don't know when I've seen you look so... lively."

"I'm all for this if that's what you really want." Dave leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "However, I'm pooped." He crossed the

small living room to his bedroom. "Don't worry about the schedule," he added. "We can work it out."

Silence descended.

"Would you be mad if I accepted Domingo's offer?" she asked Craig.

"Of course not. Tomorrow I'll be as enthusiastic as can be. I'm just tired. And I was disappointed that you weren't here. I'd hoped... Well, it's been a while since we spent any time alone together."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, trying to suppress the sudden flash of resentment she felt.

"What about us? When would I be able to see you?" he asked.

"I'd have *some* free time. I know it wouldn't be much, but it would only be for a couple of weeks."

"Promise?" His mouth had set in a straight line. "Promise you won't do it for more than two weeks."

"I'm not going to make any promises," she said firmly. "I'm sorry if you don't approve."

"Hey, listen, what are we fighting about?" Craig said suddenly, affectionately. "I don't mind for a couple of weeks, and probably that will be the end of it, anyway."

Another flash of resentment shot through Blythe. Did he have so little faith in her chances?

Craig put his arm around her. Then he said in a hesitant way that was unlike him, "I guess I'm jealous about Michael Channing's part in this. He has a lot more to offer a woman than I do..." His voice trailed away. "If we were better fixed and could get married, instead of waiting until the business is safely established..."

She felt a strong sensation inside. This was the first time he'd referred to marriage in a serious way.

He relaxed at once, smiling. "I've been acting like a jealous idiot." His arm tightened around her, urging her toward him. She heard him sigh. "We could go to my place," Craig murmured.

"It's much too late." She could feel her body stiffening. What she'd really wanted to do was to go quietly to her room, where she could lie in the dark and try to make some sense out of her emotions.

"I know." He nodded, releasing her. "I'll see you in the morning."

She made herself smile until he left, though her face felt as if it might crack. Then she turned toward her bedroom, feeling her shoulders slump with relief.

She really did love him, she thought as she slid into bed a few minutes later. He was a very important part of her life—past, present and future. As important as David, in a different way.

So what was it she felt for Michael Channing?

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LESS THAN an hour into rehearsal next evening, Blythe discovered that Domingo was a perfectionist. She had a good honest sound, he told her, but she had to learn to project the emotion and the mood of a song, to get down inside herself and come up with something more primitive, hard-hitting. And she had to learn to move.

He waved Blythe off for a short break. She walked over to Michael's table. He pulled out a chair for her, smiling sympathetically as she sank into it. "The man's a Tartar," she said.

"But I've learned more in the past hour and a half than I did in two years of music composition and theory in college."

"I heard him complaining that you need to get in touch with your own emotions," he said, raising his slanted eyebrows. His dark gaze was on her mouth. "Do you remember our castle in Camelot, where we planned to dance the night away?"

The fantasy he'd spun for her when they'd danced at Julie's wedding. She could suddenly feel again the closeness of his strong, lean body when they danced that day, the touch of his lips on her hand, the strange sensation that reality had ceased to exist around them.

For a few long moments she stared at him, caught up in the memory of that dance. Then she said tersely, "The existence of Camelot has never been historically proved."

"Ouch," he said, wincing. "Didn't you ever read fantasy?"

"I didn't need to. My parents lived it. I found out it wasn't very practical."

"And you admire practicality." His mouth turned down in a comical grimace. "I'm not making much headway here." Before she could reply, he became abruptly solemn. "I've thought a lot about last night, Blythe," he said softly.

She couldn't go on looking at him. Blythe took a deep swallow of water. "I'm practically engaged to Craig Foster," she reminded him.

"Practically sounds more promising than *unofficially*."

"So there can't be any repetition of—"

"Why not? You're not married yet—or even engaged. And I'm certainly not asking you to marry me." He lifted his eyebrows.

She felt...insulted, disappointed, angry.

"Some kind soul has probably told you that I'm divorced. It's not the sort of experience that encourages anyone to begin another serious relationship." He gave a mock shudder, then grinned. "Anyway, your boyfriend, though I'm sure he's a very worthwhile person, is not for you. You need someone who can plumb your depths. Someone like me," he added with such engaging false modesty that she was tempted to laugh.

Instead she said dryly, "You change women every week. I understand they're usually older women."

He nodded, looking suddenly bleak. "Older women are more...responsible."

"Why me, then?"

The bleak expression was replaced by a faint smile. "I have an idea you are a fairly responsible person."

"Do you really think I'd be interested in a short-term fling?"

His smile widened. "I don't see why not. It would be very good for you."

Domingo called to her before she could tell Michael what she thought of his shoddy tricks, of his leading her on by talking of that fantasy he'd invented, then informing her she'd overestimated his interest.

AFTER THE SHOW that night, Michael was waiting in the restaurant lobby. "You were great tonight," he said, opening the door for her. As they walked to the parking area, she switched the bag containing her jeans

and T-shirt into the hand next to him, creating a barrier.

"Blythe," he protested softly. "Are you afraid you won't be able to resist me?"

"How can you think such a thing?" she demanded. "Especially after you told me...suggested—" She broke off, aware of the utter impossibility of repeating the things he'd said.

He shook his head, took her arm and urged her past her car, toward his own. "I want to apologize," he said in a humble voice, and she was so surprised by his sudden reversal that she allowed him to help her into the passenger seat as though she were a doll stuffed with rags, unable to control her own limbs.

"I'm so damned attracted to you it scares me," he said after he'd walked around the car and seated himself behind the wheel. There was a disarming expression of humility on his face.

A sudden mischievous idea occurred to her. She made her face and voice deliberately grave. "Are you saying that you do want me to marry you after all?"

Only the swift intake of his breath told her she'd rocked him. "Well, that's certainly one option," he said slowly.

She should have been warned by the sudden gleam in his dark eyes. But she didn't realize he was more than a match for her until she was in his arms, being thoroughly kissed and responding just as readily as she had the previous night. And she had no wish to stop his light caresses. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to brush his thumb lightly across her nipple, teasing it erect without any effort at all.

After what seemed a long, long time, yet not quite long enough, he lifted his head away from her. "I have an idea this sort of thing doesn't happen very often," he said softly. "This total meshing of biological urges. Like two half bodies that have found their counterparts at last."

He was being facetious again. "It sounds very clinical," she said.

He laughed shortly. "Sex always does when you talk about it."

Sex.

"You're remarkably silent, sweet Blythe," he said.

She managed a very weak imitation of laughter. "I'm just trying to get my breath back," she murmured in a breezy voice she hadn't heard herself use before.

His laugh was genuine. Then he looked at her very intently. "If you don't get out of here in one second flat, I won't answer for the consequences," he announced. He kissed her nose lightly, leaned across her and opened the door.

Dumbfounded, she scrambled awkwardly out of his car.

"See you tomorrow, Daisy," he called after her.

*

MICHAEL HAD said, "See you tomorrow," but he didn't come to the Starlight on Sunday. On Monday she thought perhaps he'd had to go out of town. By Friday she was beginning to suspect he'd disappeared from her life as abruptly as he'd come into it.

She didn't hear from him during the following week, and by the last Friday of her trial period, she decided Michael had definitely given up on her. She invited David and Craig to come to

the Starlight Room for the Friday-night session.

She looked out into the audience and saw Michael Channing sitting at one of the little tables near the stage. To her dismay, her spirits, which had sunk gradually over the past two weeks, revived miraculously.

In the next instant she noticed that he wasn't alone. He'd obviously found a new woman for this week...an older, *respectable* woman. With an effort, she looked away from him and concentrated on her singing.

She had begun to sing "Come to Me." Eddie, the drummer, sang backup. His voice was pleasant, unremarkable, but combined with hers it gave the song a vibrantly erotic sound.

One by one, heads started turning. Electricity was in the air. When the song ended, the audience applauded vigorously.

Remarkably, when she sang the next song alone, she somehow discovered a new huskiness in the lower ranges of her voice that gave it an added depth of its own.

At the break, Domingo punched Eddie's shoulder and hugged Blythe and told them they were spectacular.

Craig was almost as enthusiastic. "You sounded fantastic," he said as she sat down.

And then the moment she'd dreaded was suddenly upon her. She felt a hand on her shoulder, to which her body responded. "May I join you?" Michael asked.

"Wouldn't you like to invite your friend to sit with us?" Blythe asked.

"Oh, you mean Mrs. Berenstein," he said with a charming smile. "She had to leave." Unexpectedly he put an arm around Blythe's shoulders. "I

knew you would be great. When you sang the last song alone, someone nearby asked, 'Who is she?' I'm expecting all kinds of great things of you now."

"She's only going to be singing two more nights," Craig said, his mouth set in an ominous line.

Michael looked at her questioningly.

"Craig," Blythe protested, but then Domingo tapped her on the shoulder and she had to leave.

For the rest of the evening, she was conscious of Michael looking at her with questions in his eyes.

She wasn't going to back down. Craig had behaved badly, like a spoiled little boy, and she intended to tell him so.

Exasperated, she looked at him and suddenly realized that the stubborn expression on his face was familiar. Five years ago, he'd worn this same expression when he'd sat her down in her sorority living room and proposed that she switch to business courses, instead of sticking with her music. She'd agreed it was a sensible thing to do.

For a moment she could barely breathe. For five years she'd thought the decision to switch majors was her own. But it was suddenly clear to her that she'd merely given in to pressure.

THE NEXT DAY Michael cornered her midway through rehearsal when she'd stopped for a break. "Okay, Daisy, give. What's this about two more nights and that's it?"

"Please don't call me 'Daisy,'" she said tiredly.

"Domingo is going to ask you to stay on with Temptation," Michael said softly.

She stared at him. "He told you that?"

Michael nodded. "What are you going to tell him?"

"I guess that I'm going to keep on singin'," she answered with a smile.

He leaned forward and kissed her swiftly on the mouth before she could object. "That's my girl," he said warmly, and she felt a tremor of fear go through her as her heart leaped in answer to his kiss.

He was looking at her very sheepishly now. "I guess I've been imitating Daisy myself."

"You deliberately stayed away?"

He nodded. "I have this health problem," he said solemnly. "Terminal cold feet come over me whenever I feel myself getting too close to a woman."

"Why did you come back at all, then?"

His eyes met hers, and her heart lifted with an absurd little bump.

"I remembered that I'd promised to teach you to believe in fairy tales."

She swallowed. His eyes gleamed and she felt her knees disintegrating. She stood up abruptly to break the mood but it was impossible to ignore that her whole body was yearning for him.

"Would you like to dance?" Michael asked.

She glanced at Domingo, who was working on a new song, as though she expected him to tell her what to do, but he was engrossed in his music, one foot propped on the stool he always kept on the stage, his head bent over his guitar.

As she stepped toward the dance floor she knew what was going to happen. But by then it was too late.

She was in his arms, feeling as though she belonged there. The music was all around them... one of Domingo's more romantic ballads. There was no need to make a decision. Somewhere deep in her subconscious mind it had already been made.

BLYTHE STOOD before the cathedral window of Michael's living room. She had experienced the oddest sensation of homecoming when she walked into the huge room, with its made-for-comfort chairs and sofas, its gleaming wood and glass tables and mahogany-framed fireplace, the brilliantly colored contemporary art displayed on the stark white walls, the fine stone sculptures.

"Blythe," Michael said tentatively.

She turned around to face him. They stood looking at each other, not moving.

"I'm having the most awful problem," he confided after a short silence. He swallowed. "I'm afraid if I touch you I'm going to explode."

Blythe's mouth was suddenly dry, but she returned his gaze steadily. "In that case, I have a problem, too," she told him. "If you *don't* touch me, I'm going to explode."

He took her hand and led her into the bedroom. Immediately, his mouth met hers and passion exploded between them. After he'd touched every part of her, she explored him just as wantonly.

Their movements seemed so well timed, so well fitted to each other that they might have been rehearsed beforehand. He murmured softly in her ear, something about the next dance, and she laughed weakly. "Is this Camelot?"

He lifted his head, and his smile flashed white in the shadows of his face. "Sometimes real life is better than fantasy."

He moved over her, smiling down at her as he began the next movements in the dance that had been formalized long before either of them had been born.

The slow spiraling warmth between them grew to fiery heat as his movements became more impetuous, less studied. Her blood seemed to hum through her body, filling her with an energy to match his. Her eyes were open, watching him, glorying in the tense expression of his face, the gleam of his narrowed eyes, the glint of teeth biting down hard on his lower lip. He pulled her with him into a realm of darkness where the lights in the hall seemed to be transformed into soundlessly whirling planets in the sky of some distant universe.

"SO THAT'S HOW it's supposed to be," Blythe said drowsily hours later.

Michael chuckled and she looked at him questioningly. "I had pretty much the same thought," he explained.

He pulled her head down to his shoulder, rocking her against him. But she was waking up to the fact that a lot of time had passed.

"I have to go," she murmured reluctantly. "I have to work in the office all day. I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do."

"To Craig?"

"If he's there. David, anyway. I don't know what I'm going to tell Craig." She felt a sudden plummeting sensation in her stomach.

"Are you going to tell him about me?" Michael asked.

She shook her head. "I can't do that. It would... He'd be terribly hurt. I'll have to tell him that things have changed between him and me, that I can't go on...seeing him as more than a friend. But I don't have to tell him why. I don't think there's any need for him to know about you."

He laughed, though she felt his voice reflected disappointment in her. "All of you have a pretty poor impression of me, don't you?"

She sighed. "You do have a sort of recklessness about you. Like a pirate."

He looked down at her. "My dear love, I have never stolen as much as a hotel ashtray. I'm the soul of propriety, an upright citizen who pays all his taxes and does only good works."

His face was expressing such self-satisfaction that she couldn't help laughing, even while her mind pondered the words it had seized on. *My dear love.*

He joined in her laughter as they stood on opposite sides of the bed, pulling on their clothes. "You know, Blythe, it just occurred to me that you are the only woman I've ever made love to who didn't demand first that I tell her I love her."

It took her a second to produce a voice as light as his own. "And did you tell those other women you loved them?"

He grinned at her. "I've always loved women."

This time she couldn't quite manage such a light tone. "Well, I certainly wouldn't want you to love *me*. I can't think of a worse fate than being loved by you, unless it was loving you in return."

"What's not to love?" His voice sounded slightly muffled, probably because he was bent over.

For a moment she looked at the back of his dark head and considered hurling a pillow at it. "Didn't we agree that you were a philanderer? And unreliable? And unwilling to make commitments?"

"So we did." He flashed his usual wry smile over his shoulder, stood up and headed for the bedroom door. "I'll go warm up the pumpkin, Cinderella," he said.

*

THE SUNDAY MORNING drive to her office in the bright sunlight failed to lift her spirits. Wasn't sex supposed to make you feel you could climb a mountain? Why, then, did she feel as though the mountain had dropped on her head?

When she discovered Craig had gone to make the La Jolla run, she felt like someone doomed to the guillotine who'd received a last-minute stay of execution. Somehow she dragged herself through the day.

Her head felt no clearer after she'd arrived at Chez Michel that night. If anything, her brain seemed to get thicker and woollier as the evening progressed, but it wasn't until the second break that she realized it wasn't merely fatigue that was numbing her brain, or the new "smokiness" of her voice that was giving her its deep husky sound. "I'm afraid I'm coming down with a cold," she told Domingo.

Domingo turned around. "Hey," he exclaimed, his gaze fastening on Blythe's face. "You don't look so hot. I mean you do look hot." He pressed one hand to her forehead and whistled

softly. "Home to bed for you, my beauty," he ordered.

HER DOCTOR diagnosed not a cold but influenza. Craig checked on her by telephone when he could, popped in between tours to make sure she had a pitcher of iced Gatorade and plenty of tissues handy. Even with his visits, she felt a strange emptiness. And she felt increasingly guilty. But she just couldn't tell him it was over, not until she regained her strength.

Michael also called every day. He wanted to come to visit her, but she made him see how impossible that was as long as Craig still believed his status was unaltered.

By Thursday she was able to tell Michael that her health was improving, though she doubted she'd be able to sing that weekend...her voice was still inclined to sound gravelly. "Julie took over the office for the week," she told him.

An hour later she was awakened from a doze by the sound of the doorbell. Opening the door, she found there was no one there. About to close it, she noticed a package. She picked it up and took it in.

The wrappings fell away to disclose a large, stuffed, virulently green frog made of velvet. It had absurdly long legs and enormous webbed feet. A silver foil crown sat rakishly on its head.

Laughing, she held the frog up so that she could examine its whimsically smiling face. "Michael Channing, you are a devil," she said aloud.

There was a card tied on a string around the frog's neck. "Kiss me and your dreams will come true."

She did as instructed. Immediately the doorbell rang again. Looking out

through the kitchen window, she saw Michael looking in at her, grinning wickedly.

Quite suddenly she understood that the odd emptiness she'd felt over the past several days was acute loneliness. She'd missed Michael Channing as much as she might have missed part of her own body. Because *she* loved *him*—desperately, consumingly.

She drew in a deep breath and hurried to open the door, still holding the frog. "You are an absolute idiot," she said.

"Is that any way to address a prince?"

Whatever her answer might have been, she was never going to find out. Without knowing she was going to do so, she reached out one hand toward him in a helpless little gesture. He immediately stepped into the apartment, closed the door behind him and pulled her into his arms. "You're still not feeling well, are you?" he said softly.

She allowed herself one more brief moment of clinging to him. Then she straightened and said briskly, "It's not every day a girl turns a frog into a prince. I guess my success went to my head."

Lifting her chin with one long finger, he gave her a steamy glance from under hooded eyelids. He lowered his head to kiss her.

It was a wonderful kiss that seemed to gather together all the loneliness, all the discomfort, all the worries of the past few days and send them winging into the air. All the same, somewhere in her chest an ache began that had nothing to do with her illness. She wanted him to continue holding her, to never let her go. With a soft sound of distress, she closed her eyes against the

wave of despair that suddenly washed over her.

At once he held her at arm's length. "Blythe, are you all right?" His lips touched her forehead. "I probably shouldn't have come to see you," he murmured. "It was very selfish of me, but I was missing my good friend."

His good friend. Another wave of despair washed over her as he prepared to leave.

SHE AWOKE later when Craig's smiling face appeared around the doorjamb. "You were asleep when David looked in earlier," he told her. Then he added in the same breath, "What the hell is that?"

He was staring at a spot just left of her shoulder. Uncomprehendingly Blythe followed the direction of his gaze and saw the frog.

Craig had crossed the room as he spoke, and now he picked it up. He discovered the card and read it. His gray eyes met hers. "Michael Channing," he said with absolute certainty.

Blythe nodded, letting out her breath with a sigh.

"He was here? Today?"

She nodded again.

"Craig, please," Blythe said softly. "There's something I have to tell you. I've wanted to tell you that I've stopped feeling the way I used to about you, but then I got sick and I just couldn't.... I do care about you, Craig. You must know that. But—"

His expression had hardened as she spoke. "We've always said one day we'd be married," he said harshly. He took a deep breath and shook his head, then touched her cheek lightly, his expression softening. "I guess we've put it off long enough, haven't we? Maybe

we should set a date, make it official, buy a ring...."

Panicked, she raised a hand. "No, Craig, please, you don't understand."

He pulled back, looking earnestly into her face. "I know I'm not one for romantic gestures and sweet talk and all that, but I'll change. I'll buy you roses and heart-shaped boxes of candy and—"

"Oh, Craig, it wouldn't make any difference," she murmured. "Don't you see, you and I just sort of drifted into a relationship. We never did have a great flaring passion between us."

He looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Are you telling me that's what you have with Michael Channing?"

She sighed. "I'm not talking about Michael, Craig."

"You're in love with each other? He's told you he's in love with you?"

"No. I don't—"

"Because if you believe that, you'll believe anything. He's just amusing himself with you. Every other woman he's had since his divorce hasn't lasted longer than a week." He stood, looking grimly down at her. "You think about it."

Then his face suddenly softened. "Look, you're really not up to this. We'll talk about it when you feel better." He smiled, but there was something about that smile that made her angry. It looked... patronizing. "As soon as you come to your senses, let me know. I'll be here, waiting."

He turned toward the door. Moments later she could hear Craig's voice murmuring in the kitchen, probably telling David nothing was wrong, they'd just had a minor spat and she would be over it by morning.

MICHAEL CALLED on Sunday to tell her that Domingo wanted to schedule rehearsal for ten the next morning.

"I can make it," she said.

"I'll tell Domingo." His voice was brisk. "How about lunch afterward? I have to go to Michael's on the Pier. Near Seaport Village."

"Yes, okay," she responded enthusiastically. "I'll see you tomorrow."

*

ON MONDAY morning Domingo greeted her with open arms. He swung her around, then set her down and stood beaming at her. He was obviously relieved she'd turned up today, she thought.

The rehearsal went well. Blythe felt herself being drawn into the soaring sensation she'd felt before, as though she were letting her real self live. Every time she sang, something seemed to be released inside her. She felt... right. Happy.

At the end of rehearsal, Domingo told her he wanted her to join them at his house during the week to make some suggestions about a couple of new songs they were working on. Ever since she'd met him, she'd wanted to get in on the group's songwriting. It was like a dream come true.

When Michael came in she had to forcibly stop herself from jumping to her feet and holding out her hands to him.

He had no such compunctions. He pulled her into his arms, kissing her exuberantly. Her arms went automatically around him, and she returned the kiss just as eagerly.

Behind her Domingo chuckled, and up on the stage Eddie sounded out a long, suggestive roll on his snare drum,

ending with a deafening crash of cymbals.

Michael looked over her shoulder. "Is she all through for now?" he asked.

Domingo laughed. "Looks to me like you'd better get her out of here. You tell her the news, she might get even more friendly, and I don't allow no goings-on in here, man."

"What news?" Blythe asked.

"Later," Michael said. "I'm going to prolong the suspense so you can enjoy it more." He gripped her arm and urged her toward the door. "Let's go," he said.

His restaurant was on the pier, as the name implied. They sat at one of the round tables, looking out at the water. He leaned across the table and took both her hands in his. "You remember the woman who came to the Starlight Room with me? Mrs. Berenstein?"

She could only nod, steeling herself for any confessions he might make.

"She's a scout for Sam Gregory."

She stared at him blankly for a minute, then sat up straight, as though a jolt of electricity had gone through her. "The variety and talk show on television?" Her eyes widened. "*Michael!* Sam Gregory wants Domingo on the show? That's great!"

"Not just Domingo," he said. "You. Mrs. Berenstein caught the session on Saturday and complained it wasn't as good without you."

Blythe couldn't take it in. She couldn't believe.... "It's a national show."

"Exactly." He leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth.

She was suddenly terrified. "Is Domingo sure I'm good enough?"

Michael laughed. "Daisy strikes again." He looked at her intently. "Domingo's sure. I'm sure. Mrs. Berenstein's sure." His hand covered hers warmly on the table. "You'll be great, Blythe."

She wished suddenly that he wouldn't look at her like that, so lovingly. It made her heart leap with hope. She forced a laugh, then accepted the glass of champagne he offered her. She hadn't even noticed that the waiter had brought it. "In the middle of the day?" she queried.

"Yes. Then I thought we'd play hooky," he said. "There's Seaport Village right there. We could walk around, maybe ride the carousel. . . ."

She was here with the man she loved, drinking champagne and finally absorbing the knowledge that she was, she really was, going to sing on national television.

"To Temptation," she said impulsively, raising her glass.

"To temptation." From the tone of his voice, Blythe knew Michael wasn't referring to the band. She felt a now-familiar thrill of sensation go through her at the seductive promise in his voice.

THEY DID RIDE the carousel. She felt herself smiling like a child, carefree and happy in the sunshine of a golden afternoon. Michael's answering smile was just as carefree.

On their second ride, a couple of dark-haired little girls started waving to them every time they went by. When the carousel stopped, Michael got down and, after speaking to the children's obviously pregnant mother, lifted both girls up on the platform, then settled one in front of Blythe and

one with him. Blythe held tightly to the little warm body, delighting in the child's laughter. Michael was looking down at the ecstatic little girl in his arms, listening to her chatter with the kind of grave attention children loved.

After the ride was over, the children ran from the carousel to their mother, and she called, "Thank you again," smiling at Michael.

Michael's answering smile lingered as he watched the little girls walking along the red cobbled path.

"You like children, don't you?" Blythe said warmly.

He didn't reply for a moment, and she glanced at him and saw that his smile had abruptly disappeared. His hand was tightly gripping hers. "I've always wanted children," he said slowly. "My wife was pregnant. About two and a half years ago. I was so ecstatic I didn't notice she was less than enthusiastic." He took a deep breath. "One day I came home from work and found Ellie lying on the sofa. She looked...wan. At first she didn't want to tell me what was wrong, but then she confessed she'd had an abortion."

"Dear God." She stared at him. "That's why you left her."

He nodded. "She said she didn't want the responsibility of being a mother." He laughed shortly. "Ellie and I were very young when we married. I didn't realize until too late that our playfulness together masked the fact that she didn't want any responsibilities at all."

She drew in her breath. "I'm sorry, Michael."

"You couldn't know." He attempted a smile that didn't make it to his eyes. "When I found out, I went crazy for a while, I guess. I thought I'd

never trust a woman again. I'm still not sure I'll ever be able to."

"Oh, Michael," she said helplessly. "How can you still believe in fairy tales?"

"I have to," he said simply, and she saw that his eyes were dark with tears. She reached to hold him close to her.

LATER they spent the evening at his house in La Jolla. Blythe tried to offer him comfort with her body, because she had no words to help him with. There was a kind of sweet sadness to their lovemaking. He moved his fingertips over her face, as though he were trying to memorize her features.

At one point, she heard her own voice say, "I love you, Michael. I love you." Her pulse was pounding and their bodies lifted and fell, controlled by the rhythms of their lovemaking. There was an instant of stillness, and then the pressure exploded in a great shudder with each of them at the same moment.

"I love you, Blythe," Michael said against her shoulder.

But the words had come out of him as though they'd been dragged from his soul against his will. They sounded like "goodbye."

*

"TELEVISION!" David exclaimed. "You're going on television?"

"So instead of giving up your new hobby, you want to give up the business," Craig said truculently.

Her new hobby! Blythe sat down in the customer chair beside the desk and looked up at him wearily. "I don't want to give up anything," she told him. "I just want a leave of absence

until things quiet down. Maybe we could ask Julie. She seemed to enjoy working here when I was sick."

"We've already asked Julie to join us," David said quietly. "We'll still need to take on another person if you want some time off. Craig and I have decided it makes sense to have someone in the office full-time now, rather than switching around."

"You've decided an awful lot," Blythe started to say, then stopped. She'd given up the right to complain about not being consulted.

"I have to go make the La Jolla run," Craig said abruptly, and started for the door.

"You've got fifteen minutes," Blythe pointed out. "We haven't reached any conclusions yet."

"Yes, we have." He turned at the door and looked at her bleakly. "You prefer singing to the business we built together. You prefer Michael Channing to me. What's left to discuss?"

The door slammed behind him.

Blythe stared at the closed door. "Is it so very terrible to want to sing?" All of a sudden she felt a prickling in her eyes, a lump rising in her throat.

"Are you crying?" David asked abruptly. He was suddenly kneeling in front of her.

"I've let you down. I'm so sorry, Dave."

"Sorry?" he exclaimed. "My God, why should you be 'sorry'?"

Bewildered, she stared at him. "You're not angry?"

"I am angry. With myself, not you." He plucked a tissue from the box and touched it to her eyes with infinite gentleness. "I can't believe I've been so stupid," he said. "I started going along with Craig's grumbling about the time

you've taken away from us, not even realizing what a tremendous thing you were doing. Sam Gregory wants you on his show. And all Craig and I can do is complain about the schedule." There was disbelief in his voice. "I didn't even congratulate you." He stepped back from her, holding on to her shoulders. "I am proud, Blythe. And you aren't to worry about the business. Can you forgive me, Blythe? Can you forgive Craig? I'm sure he'll see the light as soon as I have a few words with him."

"I can't go back to loving Craig," she protested. "I mean, I do love him, the way I love you, like a friend, a brother."

"But you love Michael Channing more?"

"Yes."

THE FOLLOWING weeks were easier on Blythe. Julie began working full-time in the office. She would start driving as soon as Craig and David had their new bus and managed to hire another employee.

But she saw no more of Michael than she had before. Busy herself, always running from one set of duties to another, she hadn't realized how busy *he* was. Now she saw how tremendously involved his life was. He checked on each of his restaurants every day. There were also evenings when he was engaged in charity work.

Sometimes she caught Michael looking at her with an expression of deep sadness on his face. But when she met his gaze, the mask would descend over his eyes again. Then he would pull her impulsively into his arms and make love to her with an intensity that left her breathless, as though time were

running out. He never spoke about the future.

THE DAY OF Temptation's television debut dawned sunny and cloudless. Blythe was terrified. But Michael was there, sitting in the audience, right in the front row, looking as lean and attractive as always in his dark suit, his black hair casually disarranged, his smile quizzical, loving, infinitely endearing.

She stepped to her mike. She and Eddie began to sing. Blythe could feel excitement coming at them in waves from everyone in the room. Sam Gregory in his mock-up lounge at the side of the stage was beaming approval.

When they finished, the applause was deafening.

"THIS IS ONLY the beginning, you know," Michael told her after the show.

Blythe smiled at Michael. "The beginning of what?"

"Fame. Stardom. Whatever."

She shook her head, still smiling, still feeling high from the tremendous reception Temptation had received. "Maybe nothing will happen," she said.

"It will happen." There was conviction in his voice.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes. Then Michael said, "I want to ask you something, Blythe."

She looked at him questioningly. He looked very solemn.

"I want you to consider moving in with me," he said.

"In Camelot?" she murmured.

"Exactly."

She couldn't believe she wasn't wildly happy. Why was she hesitating?

Because she wanted marriage, she finally admitted to herself. No matter how many people scoffed that the "little piece of paper" wasn't necessary, in her mind marriage meant that two people were taking responsibility for their love.

"You want to think about it for a while?" Michael asked. She nodded, and he sighed. "Well, I guess that's better than outright rejection."

She looked at him. "I've thought for a while that you were getting ready to reject me," she said.

"I was." How dark his eyes were when he wasn't smiling. "After I told you about Ellie," he said. His face warmed and the empty darkness receded from his eyes. "But I couldn't let you go."

"I don't want to be let go, Michael," she said softly.

*

BLYTHE SAT in Wanderlust's office with the young woman David had sent over for her to interview. The girl had excellent references. David had been ready to hire her on the spot. So had Craig. But David had decided Blythe was entitled to an opinion, too.

They certainly needed to hire someone. April had turned into a very busy month. Temptation had already received its first offers: a request to play for a benefit dance, an invitation to perform a concert in the university theater.

She'd had to make too many decisions lately, she thought, sighing. Michael was being very patient, waiting for her answer. She straightened in her seat and put the pen down on the desk.

If she started thinking about Michael she'd never make up her mind about Bonnie.

"You think you'll be able to get along with David and Craig okay? And Julie?" she asked Bonnie.

The girl nodded vigorously, grinning. "I don't have any trouble getting along with anyone," she said.

Blythe nodded vaguely. "Well," she said finally, "Craig and David are very impressed by your credentials. And I am, too." She smiled at the younger woman. "Welcome to Wanderlust, Bonnie. You've got yourself a job."

Bonnie had a very attractive smile. It started slowly in her eyes, moved gradually to her gamine mouth. "Thank you," she said fervently. She hesitated, adding, "He's very handsome, isn't he? I, er, don't know Craig very well, but he is awfully attractive. And nice, don't you think?"

"Very nice," Blythe said firmly.

She'd never known freckles could glow before, she thought with amusement. Bonnie's heart-shaped face was positively beaming.

MICHAEL WASN'T going to press her to move in with him, but the question was always there. He loved her, she knew that for sure. More than anyone she'd ever known, he had encouraged her to realize her true potential. And he'd given her so much joy. She wasn't going to fall in love with anyone else ever. Michael was it for her.

The Starlight Room was crowded that night. Since appearing on "The Sam Gregory Show," Temptation had become even more popular than before. The reservations were pouring in.

Michael came in halfway through the evening and gave her the little two-

fingering salute he reserved for her. Tingling sensations raced through her body like fingers of fire and her heart quickened.

She signaled Domingo, as she'd arranged, and he began the intricate intro to the song she'd written to Michael. She stepped up to the microphone.

She didn't take her gaze from him for a minute as she sang of a woman who loved a magical man who made dreams come true. The song told of a land where only two who loved could live together, and it ended, "I want to be there. I want to stay there. I want to live there... with you."

He stood up as she walked toward him. There was more shine in his eyes than usual. He pulled her straight into his arms, kissing her without heed to the observers, who had already burst into pleased applause. Domingo immediately began a wild reggae number to turn attention back to the stage.

"Blythe," Michael murmured against her mouth. "I have to tell you I've changed my mind about you. I'm so—" He broke off and looked up as one of the waiters tapped him on the arm.

"Mr. Robinson and Mr. Elliott are here, sir," the waiter said.

"Damn," Michael exclaimed. "Some people have no sense of timing." He looked apologetically down at Blythe and said, "This is important. Don't go away now."

Stunned, Blythe watched his lean figure move away from her. *I've changed my mind.* What had he meant...?

Luckily, before she could speculate herself into a panic, Michael returned. There were two men with him. Blythe

expected Michael to bring the men over to his table; but instead he led them to the table where Domingo and the other two members of the group had just sat down for their break. Moments later he was at her side again.

"Come with me," he said.

He led her to the manager's office. The moment Blythe was inside, he closed and locked the door, grinning wickedly at her. Then he poured champagne into the glasses, handed her one and raised his own in a toast. "The older man is Arthur J. Robinson, known in the trade as A.J.," he explained. "The other is Buck Elliott. They're A & R directors."

"A & R... Michael!" The glass in her hand tilted. "Artists and repertoire. They arrange for recordings to be made."

"Exactly. In this case, recordings by Temptation." He grinned. "You are looking at your temporary manager. Subject to your approval, of course. It's time I let my restaurant managers get along without my interference for awhile."

Bewildered, she was still staring at him.

He laughed. "A.J. wants a whole album, Blythe. And he wants the group to tour. I'd come along when I could, help with the arrangements. It was Domingo's idea. It's up to you."

"But you said you'd...changed your mind about me." She drew back.

He pulled her into his arms. "Don't even think it, Blythe darling. How could you live with me if you were going to be on the road? As I wouldn't dream of trying to persuade you not to go, I had to come up with a solution."

He paused and took a rather shaky breath. "Thinking about your going

away from me, I realized that I hadn't offered you anything substantial to come back to. I've been hiding in Daisy's cage because I was afraid I'd get hurt again. I wasn't sure anything so amazing could be real or lasting."

The look in his eyes was something to behold.

She nodded. "I sang you my song to tell you I'd come and live with you in Camelot."

He shook his head. "Not in Camelot. In the real world. As my wife."

She closed her eyes momentarily and offered up a silent prayer of thanks. When she opened them again, Michael was looking at her anxiously. "Will you marry me, Blythe darling?"

"Of course I will." She smiled at him wistfully. "But I'll miss Camelot."

"We can visit, don't you think?"

She nodded, letting the smile that had been waiting break through. "We can visit."

His arms slipped around her and his mouth met hers. All her senses soared. There was no hurry now. They had a lifetime to love in.

Outside the office door someone laughed, and she became aware that people were nearby. But she couldn't bring herself to care. She wasn't thinking of the people out there at all. She wasn't worrying about Domingo, who must be waiting for her to return to her place on the stage. She was simply responding as passionately as she knew how to Michael's kisses.






TRACY SINCLAIR

Stars in Her Eyes



Logan Marshall thought that all beautiful women wanted something from him. Why else had Lisa Brooks appeared on his doorstep one stormy night saying her car had broken down?



The windshield wipers on the small car waged a losing battle with the torrential rains. November was the wet season in Los Angeles but it seldom formed like this, which was small comfort to Lisa Brooks, as the little car kittered around the sharp curves of Coldwater Canyon.

Rocks and mud slides were encroaching on the road and the vehicle was making warning noises again. *Oh please, dear Lord, not tonight*, she begged!

The car was four years old, and it wasn't made to take the hills. Lisa's tight course in the San Fernando Valley, over the hills from where she lived, meant the little car began to break down with a regularity that was becoming monotonous.

Now it was 11:00 p.m., and Lisa was wishing she'd skipped class, feeling the way she did. A cold she'd caught a week before had worsened, and when the car chugged over the summit to die with a racking cough that coincided with one of her own, Lisa felt like bursting into tears.

Instead, she wiped a clear spot on the steamy windshield and saw a pair of stone gates guarding a long driveway. A glimmer of lights in the distance indicated a house and, grimly, Lisa got out of the car. Maybe they could at least call the auto club for her.

The driveway seemed to wind on forever. It was lined with dense shrubbery and towering trees that appeared

to be alive. Through the rain that soaked her to the skin, lights beckoned and receded like secret signals, guiding her to an imposing white house. Was this all just an hallucination?

Shaking her head to clear it, she pressed the bell. The door opened to reveal a tall man in a black suit. "I'm sorry to disturb you," she faltered, "but could I use your phone? My car has broken down."

"That is not very original, young lady," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" His voice seemed to come from a great distance and now the door was starting to close. She panicked. "Please help me! You don't have to let me in. If you'll just call the auto club!"

"You can use the phone at the gas station. It's at the bottom of the hill," the man said with finality.

A cold wind lifted the skirts of Lisa's raincoat. She pushed against the door desperately. "You can't turn me away! All I'm asking for is a phone call."

"Who is it, Rogers?" A deep male voice asked the man.

"Another of those would-be actresses, Mr. Marshall. I'll deal with it."

His words didn't even register but, hearing another voice, Lisa pushed inside, crying, "My car is dead. Won't you please make a phone call for me?"

Her confused senses registered a huge entry hall with a graceful curving staircase. A man moved toward her.

Although she was reasonably tall, he towered over her, his hawklike face wearing a frown. She had a swift impression of high cheekbones and dark hair falling over a broad, tanned forehead, but it was his piercing blue eyes that riveted her.

As she gazed up at him beseechingly, another man appeared and asked, "What's up, Logan?"

"I'm not sure."

Lisa turned to the other man, who seemed more approachable. "All I want to do is use the phone."

"That doesn't seem unreasonable." He smiled.

Lisa fumbled for her wallet.

The man named Logan subjected her to an intense scrutiny. "Come into the den," he ordered.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Lisa followed him into a big room with book-lined walls and a glowing fireplace. She was so cold that her teeth were chattering as she asked, "Could I borrow your phone book?"

"You'd better get out of those wet things and warm up by the fire first," the man called Logan said.

"It's all right." A racking cough left her breathless but when she could speak, Lisa said, "I'd better make my call."

"Do as I say. I'll pour you a brandy."

His manner was so autocratic that Lisa found herself following instructions. And she was shivering so uncontrollably that the fire was irresistible.

The hood of her raincoat had been pulled down. When she pushed it back now, both men drew in their breath sharply.

"Sweet charity, what a face!" The second man whistled.

Lisa pushed the damp auburn hair off her forehead and looked at them out of frightened emerald eyes.

"Who are you?" the man named Logan demanded.

She pulled her white sweater down nervously, regretting the gesture as his eyes moved to the upward tilt of her firm young breasts. "My... my name is Lisa Brooks."

"Do you know who I am?" he challenged.

She shook her head, looking at the other man for help.

He said, "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Brian Metcalfe and this conquistador is Logan Marshall."

They both looked at her expectantly. "I... I'm very happy to meet both of you," she faltered.

Logan said cynically, "I suppose you just happen to have a script in your pocket with a part you'd like to read for me."

It was like a scene out of *Alice in Wonderland*. What had she blundered into? Lisa had only been in Los Angeles for a little over two months, but even in her native Texas, there had been talk about the kinky people of Hollywood. "I think I'd better get back to my car now."

"Wait a minute." Logan started toward her. "What kind of game are you playing?"

The cruel twist of his sensual mouth frightened her and she started to run for the door, but he caught her, his hands firm on her shoulders. She tried to struggle, but her arms and legs felt like they were stuffed with cotton. From being freezing cold, she felt

urning hot, and then the man named Brian put his hand on her cheek.

"Lie down on the couch," he said gently.

That galvanized her and she opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out. The room spun around and then everything went dark.

"Put her on the sofa and tell Rogers to get my bag out of the car," Brian Metcalfe said crisply. "I think we have a very sick young lady here."

His hands were gentle as he touched her forehead, then used a stethoscope to listen to her labored breathing.

"Nothing like having a doctor for a best friend," Logan quipped. "Is she really as sick as she looks?"

"Worse. I think it's pneumonia. I'll have to get her to the hospital immediately."

He moved toward the phone but Logan stopped him. "You can't take her out in weather like this! There could be mud slides by now."

"I don't want to wait for an ambulance. She needs help fast!"

"Then bring it here," Logan said. "Call for some nurses and any equipment you need. I'll put her to bed upstairs."

Lisa was quiet in his arms as he carried her up into a large bedroom. But when he set her gently on the broad bed, she stirred restlessly. "I'm hot... it's too warm," she mumbled.

He was at her side instantly, carefully pulling the sweater over her head and slipping off the navy wool skirt. She watched him uncomprehendingly out of fever-bright eyes. But when she was stripped to a lacy bra and brief silk panties, a shudder passed through her.

"I'm so cold," she whimpered, cuddling close to him.

Logan's arm closed around her, and an expression crossed his face that bore no resemblance to the wintry look people were used to seeing in those cold blue eyes.

After a moment's hesitation, he unclasped the wispy bra and reached for a silk pajama jacket. But when the creamy, pink-tipped breasts were exposed, Logan caught his breath at the perfection of the slim body he held in his arms. It wasn't until Lisa tried to move close to him again that he quickly buttoned the top and slid her between the covers.

"Okay, everything's set in motion," Brian said, coming into the room. "A nurse will be here within half an hour, and I've sent for a tank of oxygen just in case."

"Is she that badly off?"

"Well, you can see for yourself she's delirious. It's the high fever—we have to bring that down."

The nurse arrived a short time later, and after conferring with her in low tones, Brian motioned to the other man. "Everything is under control here. We'd better go downstairs and see if we can find out anything about her."

Brian started going through Lisa's purse, but Logan objected. "I don't feel right about this."

"I know, but all we know is her name."

The contents of the purse weren't that helpful. "It looks like she's a tourist," Brian commented. "Lisa Brooks, age twenty-four, address—42 Poplar Place, Abilene, Texas. Well, tomorrow we can call her people to make arrangements about putting her in the hospital."

Logan frowned. "I don't see any point in moving her."

Brian stared at the other man. "Isn't this quite a switch for you? You spend all your time trying to keep women out of here—except for selected ones of course."

"She's different—she needs help," Logan said stiffly.

"And what happens when she wakes up and discovers that by a great stroke of fortune she just happened to land in the lap of the famous Logan Marshall—the man who can make any girl into a star overnight?"

Logan scowled. "Are you trying to tell me she's faking this illness?"

"No, of course not. Only that when she gets better—which I sincerely hope she will—" his face sobered for a moment—"she will probably be no different from all the other little starlets with their eyes out for the main chance."

"In that case, I'll turn her out." Logan shrugged.

Brian eyed his friend thoughtfully. "I wonder."

THE NEXT THREE DAYS passed in a blur for Lisa. Most of the time she slept, but often, she would awake to find a tall, dark man standing over her, his hands gentle as they smoothed the silky hair off her forehead. Or was she just imagining it?

One morning all the cobwebs were gone and Lisa sat up. She was in the middle of a large four-poster bed with a white eyelet tester on top. The fabric was duplicated in long curtains at the windows, contrasting with the dark blue carpet and blue velvet chaise.

A woman in a starched uniform got up from a chair. "Are you feeling better this morning?" She smiled.

Lisa stared at her in bewilderment. "Who are you? And where is this place?"

She started to throw back the covers but the woman urged her back onto the pillows. "Just lie back, my dear."

"No, I want to get up! Why are you trying to keep me here?"

"What's going on, Mrs. Dempster?" A man appeared in the doorway. The same man from Lisa's misty dreams.

He wore gray flannels and there was a towel slung around his neck, but his bronzed chest was bare, showing a mass of dark, curly hair that descended in a vee to his navel. Approaching the bed, he smiled down at her. "So you finally decided to come back and join us."

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"I'm Logan Marshall. Don't you remember? Your car broke down."

Her memory returned slowly. "But that was last night."

"You've been very sick," he told her gravely. "You had us worried for a few days."

"A few days! How long have I been here?"

"Well, well, it looks like our patient has turned the corner." Brian came in and strode over to the bed.

Lisa huddled back against the pillows. "I don't know what's going on. I had a little cold but that was no excuse for putting me to bed." She pulled the covers up to her chin. "And it better have been that woman who undressed me!"

A slight smile tilted Logan's firm mouth as Brian said, "You had more

han a little cold, young lady. You had pneumonia and it was touch and go here for a while."

"Really?" Her wide eyes searched their faces. "Well, I... I'm sorry if I was a nuisance but I'd like to get dressed now and then I'll go."

"You aren't going anywhere," Brian told her sternly. "Didn't you hear what I told you?"

"But I have to go to work. I'm probably late already."

"What's all this about work?" Logan asked. "Aren't you just visiting from Texas?"

"That's where I used to live."

Brian was regarding Logan steadily. "Didn't you try to contact her relatives in Abilene?"

"I didn't see any reason to," he replied austerely.

Brian turned to Lisa. "If you'll give me your phone number in Texas, I'll contact anyone who might be worried."

"Thank you," she said, "but there isn't anyone."

He looked at her piercingly. "I can hardly believe that."

"It's the reason I came to California," she said. "My... my father died three months ago." Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "He was all the family I had and I wanted to get away."

Brian patted her hand. "I see. Well then, all you have to concentrate on is getting well." Turning to the nurse, he said, "I'll leave some instructions for you, Mrs. Dempster."

"Wait!" Lisa cried. Lowering her voice, she said, "Is she a private nurse?" When Brian nodded, her agitation increased. "How long has she been here?"

"Since the night you took ill. You're coming along fine though," he reassured her. "We let the other nurses go."

"Other nurses! Good heavens, I can't afford that!"

"Why don't you let me worry about it?" Logan smiled down at her.

"And I can't stay here either," she told him.

Brian took her hand. "You're going to stay right here and not upset yourself about anything or you'll have a relapse—and be here a lot longer. Do you understand me?"

She nodded weakly, realizing for the first time how exhausted she felt.

A large basket of red roses was the first thing Lisa saw when she opened her eyes in the late afternoon.

"Aren't they gorgeous?" Mrs. Dempster asked. "Mr. Marshall sent them. Such a nice man. It just shows you shouldn't go by what you read in the paper." Lisa was puzzled but before she could ask for clarification, the nurse held out a beautiful lavender satin nightgown with lace across the bosom.

"Where did that come from?" Lisa eyed it.

"Mr. Marshall sent it along with the roses."

"I can't accept it!" A thought occurred to Lisa. "Did you undress me the night I got sick?"

"No, you were in bed when I got here." Without noticing Lisa's pink cheeks, she unbuttoned the pajama coat and started to slip the gown over her head.

Mrs. Dempster had just finished tying a length of satin ribbon around Lisa's hair when Logan Marshall ap-

peared in the doorway. "I see the gown came. Is the color all right?"

"It's beautiful, but you really shouldn't have." Her fingers nervously touched the lace. "Now I owe you for this in addition to all the rest."

"Don't you think it's rather ungracious to offer to pay for a gift?" He pulled a chair up to the bed and the nurse tactfully left the room.

"Why should you give me a gift? You don't even know me."

"Perhaps I know you better than you think."

"Who are you, Mr. Marshall?" she asked abruptly.

"Logan, please. But first, tell me who you are, Lisa. What do you do?"

"I'm a secretary—or at least I was. My father was a professor of history. He also wrote books and I did research for him besides typing up his manuscripts."

"You said you *were* a secretary. Did you come here to get into a different line of work?"

"No, I told you why I left Abilene. But I haven't been able to get secretarial work here. I've taken a sales job to tide me over but I left my name at a number of agencies. I'm really a very good secretary," she said plaintively.

"I'm sure you are. Have you ever wanted to act?"

"Of course not!" Her laughter was incredulous.

"You're very beautiful," he murmured.

Her lashes fell before the light in his eyes. "Thank you, but acting is a profession. You have to study for it, not just decide to take it up."

"That's an interesting theory."

She dismissed the subject. "What do you do?"

"I'm the head of Magnum Studios."

"You make movies?" she asked. He nodded curtly. "That must be... um... very interesting," she said politely.

Logan's eyes glinted with amusement as he took her hand and kissed the palm. "Lisa, you're too good to be true. I wonder how long you'll remain this way."

There was a light rap at the door and Rogers, the butler, said, "Excuse me, sir, but there's a phone call for you."

Logan stood up. "Brian told me not to stay too long. I'll see you tomorrow, Lisa. Sleep well."

She stared after his receding back with a small sense of loss. He seemed to charge the very air with electricity. He was fantastically handsome of course, his dark good looks exuding an animal magnetism that made him both dangerous and exciting. But he lived in a completely different world. Wouldn't she be an idiot to risk an emotional involvement with such a man?

Lisa recalled reading about Logan's exploits in gossip columns that hadn't been very kind to him. They pictured him as cruel and ruthless, and yet looked how kind he had been to Lisa, a perfect stranger.

She glanced around, seeing evidence of this everywhere—flowers, books and magazines, even her nightgown. And this beautiful room with a nurse to cater to her every need.

Lisa made a decision. Tomorrow, she would be firm with that doctor. It would never do to get used to all this.

IN SPITE OF Lisa's avowed intentions, it was Brian, abetted by Logan, who was firm with her.

"We will not even discuss the matter of your leaving here for at least a week, is that clear?"

Mrs. Dempster was out of the room so Lisa felt free to speak. "When I think what all this is costing, I could jump out of my skin. If I agree to stay for a week, will you let Mrs. Dempster go?"

Brian shrugged. "I don't see why not. It's probably better than having you worry yourself into a decline."

Lisa was elated but soon found she had won only a minor point. She was to stay in bed and take care of herself or the nurse would return.

The days passed speedily, to her surprise. Logan paid her a visit every morning, and the rest of the day she was still weak enough to appreciate just reading and dozing.

At first, Lisa was worried about the added work for the servants. But Mrs. Swenson, the housekeeper, was happy to have a guest. She was a marvelous cook who delighted in devising little treats to tempt Lisa's flagging appetite.

"You are nothing but skin and bones," she said. "See that she cleans her plate, Lucy," Mrs. Swenson told her sturdy young housemaid who brought up the trays.

One night toward the middle of the week, Logan came into her room in tightfitting jeans, instead of one of the sober business suits he wore to the office or the elegant evening clothes that proclaimed a night on the town. A

black turtleneck sweater hugged his broad shoulders and chest.

"I'm not going out tonight," he said. "Do you feel like company?"

"It...it would be very nice, but you mustn't feel you have to entertain me."

He looked at her for a long moment. "Did you ever think it might be the other way around?"

Lisa couldn't meet the flame in his eyes and she ducked her head. "Would you like to play gin rummy?" she asked.

"I'd love to!" he said, chuckling.

They played cards on the king-size bed, bickering amiably as Logan's score rose. Once he looked at her petulant face with a secret smile. "You might as well get used to it, emerald eyes, I always win—sooner or later."

The memory of that evening stayed with Lisa all the next day, even though she tried to reason with herself. The fact that he had spent it with her didn't mean anything. She was so convinced Logan would take up his former pursuits that it was a shock when he appeared that night with a deck of cards.

"Are you ready for another lesson?" he asked, teasing.

She smiled brightly. "Only if I keep score this time."

As he shuffled the cards, Lisa said, "Logan, could I ask you for a tremendous favor?"

His hands stilled for a moment. "Of course."

"You've done so much for me already that I hesitate, but...I'm awfully tired of lying around in nightgowns. I wondered if you could stop by my apartment and get some clothes for me. It's high time I got out of bed." His expression was so strange that she hurried on. "It isn't really im-

portant. My place is way across town...."

Powerful emotions warred on Logan's face. "That's all you wanted to ask me for?"

"Please forget the whole thing," she begged.

Taking both of her hands, he held them tightly. "You're very good for me, Lisa. You remind me that there is a whole other world besides the one I live in." He went on, "I'll pick up some clothes for you. Do you have an evening gown?"

Her puzzlement showed. "Yes. Why?"

"Because tomorrow night you're coming downstairs. We're going to have a champagne dinner by candlelight."

"Oh, Logan, that would be wonderful!"

A suitcase was delivered to Lisa the next morning and after hanging up her green chiffon gown, she spent most of the afternoon getting ready. The gown was slightly loose because of the weight she'd lost, but there were still enough curves to fill the draped bodice. Logan's appreciative eyes confirmed that fact.

They went into the den for a cocktail first and Lisa looked around with interest. "It's a beautiful room, isn't it?"

"You sound surprised," he said dryly. "But then, I suppose your first impression didn't endear."

Lisa colored and changed the subject. "You've both been so good to me. Whatever Brian's bill is, it's worth it. And of course I'm going to pay you back for Mrs. Dempster."

"That's what I want to talk to you about, Lisa."

She shook her head. "I don't want to hear it. I didn't realize it at the time, but you've very possibly saved my life."

He cupped her chin, looking deep into her eyes. "The Chinese believe that if you save someone's life, you're responsible for them."

His touch was gentle, yet it made the blood thunder in her veins as she murmured, "We're not Chinese."

"I want to take care of you, Lisa. Won't you let me?"

Her heart was racing. With any other man, the meaning would have been clear, but Logan had demonstrated that his interest in her was platonic. He hadn't even kissed her. And that wasn't what Lisa wanted. For perhaps the first time, she began to realize that her interest in Logan was threatening to get out of hand.

With that in mind, she moved a safe distance away from him. "When my father died and I lived through that, I knew I could face anything. Don't worry, I'll get by."

"Doing what? Working in a department store?"

"It pays the rent."

"I have a better idea. Why don't you come to work for me? My private secretary just asked for a month's leave. Her daughter in New York is having the first grandchild any minute. You'd really be doing me a favor, Lisa."

"Do you honestly mean it?" Her eyes shone.

Logan took her hand. "I really need you, Lisa."

She gave him a dazzling smile. "In that case, I'd be delighted! When would you want me to start?"

He frowned. "There's no hurry. I can always make do with temporary help until you're completely well."

"But I am! Let's see, this is Thursday—if I leave tomorrow, that will give me a long weekend to tidy my apartment. I can start on Monday. That's *almost* a week."

"We'll see," he said noncommittally.

Rogers announced dinner at that point and they went into the dining room. It was dominated by a long table fashioned from a length of rose-veined marble. Flocked wallpaper added elegance. A massive crystal chandelier was dimmed now in deference to the twin silver candelabra's glowing candles.

The table was set with flowered Coalport china, sterling, and several vineglasses at each place setting.

As Rogers poured white wine into her glass, Lisa smiled up at him. It didn't seem possible he was the same man who had frightened her so badly that night on the doorstep.

They had reached the main course before Lisa asked Logan, "Why don't you ever talk about your work?"

"I don't want to bore you."

"How could you? Show business must be fascinating."

"Not my end of it." He shrugged. "I deal in money and scripts. I try to pick the best people for the job, then convince the bankers to rely on my judgment."

"I see," she said uncertainly.

The blue eyes were mocking. "I'm sure you don't. Your idea of movie-making is giant sound stages filled with costumed people waiting for the director to shout, 'Quiet, everyone, this is take.'"

"Isn't that the way it happens?"

"Sure—after interminable waits between scenes. Have you ever been on a

movie set?" When she shook her head, Logan said, "It's about as much fun as watching paint dry."

Lisa took a sip of the excellent red wine that accompanied the beef. "I can scarcely believe that. Why would all those people try so desperately to break into movies?"

He shrugged. "Money...fame...a childish desire to show off."

"You don't like actors very much, do you?" Lisa absently drained her glass.

His mouth twisted. "Let's say they're a necessary evil. Grown men and women who'll sell their souls—and their bodies—for the applause of a fickle public."

"How about the truly great actors, like the Barrymores and Sarah Bernhardt?"

"I wasn't referring to performers of that caliber."

Lisa giggled suddenly. "All right, I won't become a movie star. May I have some more wine?"

He took in her flushed cheeks and sparkling green eyes. "I think you're reaching the saturation point. Maybe black coffee would be a better idea."

She lowered her lashes. "You promised me champagne."

Logan laughed and covered her hand with his. "All right, but go easy."

When Rogers brought in a silver ice bucket at the end of the meal, Logan said, "Here's your champagne. Would you like to have it by the fire in the den?"

"That would be lovely," she agreed.

The dinner had been delicious and Lisa felt warm and relaxed. She seemed to float over the thick carpet, a delightful feeling. But when she took

Logan's arm, smiling dreamily up at him, he asked, "Do you feel all right?"

"I feel *wonderful*!" She spread her arms and whirled around. A mistake, for when she stopped, the room didn't.

"I think we'll save the champagne for tomorrow night," he said, lifting her in his arms.

"Oh no, Logan, I'm fine." But her head was spinning.

"You will be in the morning," he assured her.

When Logan carried her into her room and set her gently on the bed, Lisa promptly curled into a little ball.

Shaking her gently, Logan said, "You'd better get undressed."

Her feathery brows drew together. "I don't feel like it."

Logan lifted her into his lap while he removed the long gown. "This is getting to be a habit." He chuckled.

Suddenly the mists cleared and Lisa was conscious of the sensuous feeling of strong male hands on her bare skin. She could feel the warmth of his body and smell the clean aromas of English soap mixed with tobacco and something else. A flame started below her waist and swept upward, threatening to devour her. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced and she clung tightly to Logan.

His own arms tightened for a moment, then he said in a husky voice, "Let go, darling, so I can put you in bed."

Without releasing her grip, Lisa whispered, "Don't leave me."

A flame leaped in his eyes. "You don't know what you're saying. You've had too much to drink," he said harshly.

"No, I haven't." Tears filled her lovely eyes as she let him break her

hold. "I'm not beautiful enough for you. You don't want me."

Logan gathered her in an embrace that threatened to crush her. "Oh God, if you only knew!"

She drew back, and giving him a tremulous smile, she murmured "Aren't you *ever* going to kiss me?"

With a groan of surrender, Logan covered her mouth. His lips demanded a response that Lisa was only too happy to give, and when he probed her mouth with a driving masculinity that she had never experienced before, she trembled with anticipation.

His hand wandered lovingly over her bare skin, setting her on fire. Soon his lips followed, trailing a line of arousing kisses. His warm mouth tasted each creamy breast lingeringly, evoking a cry of delight.

She helped him remove his shirt and when his splendid torso was exposed, Lisa pressed her lips to it. With a low, throaty sound, Logan put her down on the bed and covered her body with his. The feeling was inexpressible and she moved against him.

"I never knew it would be like this," she murmured.

"My beautiful angel," Logan whispered. Lisa lifted her mouth for his kiss, but suddenly the tide of passion was stemmed as he looked at her sharply. "What did you say?"

Lisa smiled dreamily. "I don't know. Kiss me, Logan."

"You said you didn't know it would be like this."

"Oh, yes. Is it always this wonderful, Logan?"

He sat up. "Haven't you ever been with a man, Lisa?"

The change in him frightened her. "No, I... I've never... Does it matter?" she pleaded.

"Does it *matter*? Do you know what you almost made me do?" He ran a savage hand through his thick hair. "My God, have I sunk so low that I'd take advantage of a tipsy virgin?"

Lisa sat up and pulled the covers over her naked body. "But you didn't. I was the one—"

"Go to sleep, Lisa."

With a desolation that was crushing, she watched his tall figure stride out the door. Had she really offered herself for the first time—and been turned down?

But what had she expected? Logan had told her his opinion of "easy women," and she was one of the easiest! The only tiny ray of salvation was that he thought she was drunk. But Lisa knew that wasn't the case. Maybe she had been a little high when he carried her upstairs, but when he held her, she had sobered instantly.

This was what she had been yearning for all week, even as she fought against the secret knowledge that she was falling in love with a man she could never have. Logan Marshall was as unobtainable as the North Star. And what would he think of her after tonight? Would it make him more understanding if he knew she had fallen in love with him? No! That was something he must never find out!

The only solution was not to see him again. After he left for work tomorrow, she would gather every trace of herself and slip out of his house.

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THE SMALL apartment looked shabby after Logan's house. Glancing at the worn sofa, Lisa couldn't help comparing it with the one in his den. But that brought back thoughts of him which she had come home to avoid. Lisa set to work cleaning, scrubbing and polishing. By late afternoon the little place sparkled. After taking a shower and washing her hair, she chose a long, flowered housecoat instead of dressing again, and padded barefoot into the living room.

Lisa considered making herself something to eat, but the couch looked so inviting that she decided to rest first. Her eyes closed and the next thing she knew, the doorbell was pealing insistently.

The room was in darkness as she stumbled to the door, the mists of sleep dissipating as she focused on Logan. "What are you doing here?" she mumbled.

"I might ask you the same thing. Why did you run away, Lisa?"

She stepped aside reluctantly so Logan could enter the living room, his presence seeming to make it even smaller.

"I didn't run away," she said, carefully inspecting the knot in his tie. "The week was almost up. I thought it would be easier this way," she said miserably. "I didn't think you'd want me around anymore."

"That's interesting. Because of last night?"

"Yes." She couldn't look at him. "I know what you think of me."

"Are you sure?" he asked quietly, his hands gentle on her shoulders. "It isn't a crime to have a little too much

wine. Actually, it was my fault. I should have realized your weakened condition." He lifted her chin, his eyes searching her troubled face intently. "It's just fortunate that I found out in time. You have a wonderful gift to bestow, my dear. It should be given to someone you love."

Her eyes shimmered behind lowered lashes. Lisa didn't dare look at him for fear he would see her secret. "What if I never fall in love?"

"You will," he said confidently.

She shook her head. "I doubt it."

"I can't believe there haven't been boyfriends."

She shrugged, remembering the urgent young men in Abilene. They were just boys compared to this dynamic man. There was no one like Logan; now having known him, she could never settle for second best.

"I go out on dates," she acknowledged, "but there's nobody special. Maybe because I don't want there to be."

"Don't you want to get married, Lisa?"

She swallowed hard. "No way. If a man got serious about me, I'd run." That was the truth. Anyone but Logan.

His eyes were wintry. "I see. Well, it's nice to meet a woman who knows her own mind."

After Logan was convinced that she felt fit enough to begin work at his office on Monday, and after he accepted the fact that she wasn't returning to his house, he took a reluctant leave. Lisa felt like she had been put through a wringer, but there was a strange exhilaration too. For another whole month, she would continue to see him every

day. It was like being given an unexpected gift.

LISA FOUND the work fascinating and the days flew by. Her special delight was sitting in on the conferences where movies were planned and important details ironed out.

As Logan Marshall's secretary, she found that everyone went out of his way to be nice to her, and a lot of men asked her for dates. Mindful that they might be using her to get to Logan, she was cautious about accepting. And strangely enough, they never asked twice.

One day, Logan stopped by her desk. "There's going to be a conference this afternoon on the new picture and I'd like you to take notes."

The director, producer, art director and numerous assistants were all there. The starting date for the movie had been set and Logan was calling for reports.

"I think we have the location pretty well narrowed down to two choices," John Babcock, the producer, said. "Either Nukualofa in the Tongas or Pago Pago in Samoa."

Logan's look was frosty. "The budget on this picture precludes a game of eeny-meeny. As I see it, we have only one choice. We'll fly out there and take a look."

After the meeting broke up, Lisa's work began in earnest. Logan gave her a list of names and told her to call the traffic department to arrange for airline tickets.

"I think we'll fly into Pago Pago—I know they have a landing field. We'll charter a yacht from there. Have them arrange it and also book hotel rooms. Do you have a passport?" he asked.

"No. I've never been anywhere to need it."

"Call the legal department, have them contact Washington and get it rushed through."

"But I don't understand. Why?"

"You *do* expect to come back to this country don't you? And I need a secretary. Shorthand isn't one of my talents."

It's the only thing that isn't, Lisa thought, giving him a dazzling smile.

IT WAS BROAD daylight when the plane swooped in for a landing at Pago Pago. Warm, balmy air greeted them, and the company was herded into a small, ramshackle bus.

Logan was always surrounded by such luxury that Lisa expected a fleet of limousines, at the very least. The mocking look on his face as he helped her aboard, taking the seat next to hers, indicated that he had read her mind and was amused by it.

The narrow road that led to the hotel wound through lush countryside where dense banks of tangled green were punctuated by velvety hibiscus and brilliant bougainvillea.

There was much confusion when they finally arrived at the hotel, a charming two-story building with a broad veranda. They were all assigned rooms, with instructions to be downstairs in half an hour. The first order of the day was a visit to inspect the fabled Pago Pago harbor.

A whole fleet of cars had been put at their disposal, though the harbor area was only a few short blocks from the hotel. "We could have walked!" Lisa exclaimed.

Logan raised an eyebrow. "I'm afraid you'll never be a star, Lisa my

love. Don't you know movie people never do anything as mundane as walking?"

She gave him an impish grin. "If I promise to forgo a movie career, will you walk back with me?"

Putting his arm around her shoulders, he said, "It's a deal."

While the crew investigated the dock area, Lisa wandered around admiring the magnificent view. The sun was shining brilliantly in a tropical sky of burning blue. It cast diamond sparkles on the calm water of the harbor. When her dazzled eyes focused, Lisa saw tiny rainbow-colored fish swimming near the surface. Swinging her legs over the wooden wharf, she perched on the edge, peering in fascination.

"Are you ready for that walk now?" Logan's deep voice inquired.

He helped her to her feet. "I'll take you to see something of the town."

It was more like a sleepy little village. Small shops displaying brightly patterned clothing were wedged in next to general stores whose fly-specked windows contained everything from aspirin to woven baskets. In the center of town, a tremendous *fale*, or thatched roof on pole supports, served as an open-air market.

"The fishermen bring their catch here very early in the morning," Logan explained. "At this hour of the day all they have are fruits and vegetables."

Huge pyramids of fragrant pineapples were mounded next to giant fans of ripe bananas, oranges and limes.

Lisa was in seventh heaven as they strolled along. Suddenly the sky darkened.

"How can it be raining when the sun was just out?" she asked.

"Oh, oh, I'd forgotten about that!" Logan wrapped her in his jacket and he raced her across the street and up the rickety steps of a big wooden building. They were both drenched by the time they reached the overhang.

"It's an absolute downpour!" she marveled.

"That's the way it rains here." Logan pulled the jacket more closely around her. "Are you all right? I don't want you to catch a chill."

She laughed helplessly. "It's eighty degrees out."

"But you just got over a bad illness." Holding her in the curve of his arm, Logan gently brushed the wet hair out of her eyes.

They were standing very close together in the shadows and Lisa's hand moved irresistibly to his wet shirt front. "You're the one who's soaked," she murmured.

Logan's fingers feathered her cheek, then the delicate skin behind her ear, tracing a path to the hollow of her throat where a pulse beat wildly. "I don't mind," he said softly.

She touched the dark hair that showed through the open neck of his sport shirt, feeling the warmth of his skin. Almost unconsciously she slid her hand inside, moving her palm over the hard-muscle chest. Her breathing was constricted as she whispered, "We ought to be getting back so you can get out of those wet clothes."

He drew her closer and she raised her face to his. A flame leaped through Lisa's body as her lips parted. They seemed cut off from the rest of the world.

An aggrieved voice shattered the illusion. "Isn't this weather the pits?" Marsha Block, the production supervisor, was shaking her head to dislodge the raindrops.

Moving casually away, Logan turned to the other woman. "We forgot rule number one—never go out in Pago Pago without an umbrella."

"I didn't believe it could rain so suddenly," Marsha said.

"Or clear up so fast," Logan said, pointing to the sunshine. "Come on, ladies. I'll get us a cab."

"I think I'll stay out and do a little shopping," Marsha told him. "How about it, Lisa? Would you like to look around the stores?"

"That sounds like fun. You don't mind do you, Logan?"

When he gave in reluctantly, Lisa breathed a sigh of relief. She wanted to drink in this tropical paradise, yet with Logan around, nothing else seemed to matter.

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LISA WAS BRUSHING her hair the next morning when Logan tapped on the door. He looked impossibly handsome in tight, well-washed jeans and a navy T-shirt. There was a quizzical smile on his face. "Are you ready to go on tour?"

"Oh, but . . . you took me into town yesterday."

"That was just a teaser. Today we'll visit the other side of the island and stop for a swim. Would you like that?"

"It sounds wonderful! Are you sure you have the time?"

"What's the point in being the boss if you can't do what you want once in a while?" He grinned. "Put your suit

on under your clothes and I'll meet you in the lobby in five minutes."

The narrow road wound through wilderness at times before turning abruptly to parallel the ocean. On the other side was a picture-postcard beach. People were sunbathing lazily while children splashed in the sparkling surf. Farther out, sailboats skimmed the surface like large white birds.

After choosing a spot away from everyone else, Logan spread out the towels, then casually shrugged out of his T-shirt. Lisa's eyes were drawn to his powerful shoulders and the tanned chest darkened by crisp hair. Then he pulled down the tight jeans, revealing narrow hips and long, muscular legs.

"Aren't you going swimming?"

Lisa drew a breath. "I... Yes, of course."

She hurriedly pulled her cotton shirt over her head.

"You look like a rose," Logan said. Taking in her slender body in the tiny suit, he added softly, "A beautiful red rose."

Lisa's heart was beating so fast she thought he must hear it. "I'll race you to the water," she gasped.

Logan overtook her easily. Grasping her hand, he pulled her after him into the foaming water. He was a strong swimmer, but he sensed immediately when she was tiring, making the decision to go back.

After they dried off, Logan suggested a walk. They strolled far up the beach to a spot that was virtually deserted. The sand was just a narrow spit here.

"I guess this is the end of the road," Lisa said.

Logan touched her arm. "Let's sit here on the sand for a while."

"But our towels are back there," she pointed out.

"So are crowds of people."

She laughed nervously. "You are really spoiled, do you know that?" she said lightly. "You're so used to private pools and clubs and—"

His hand at the nape of her neck effectively silenced the desperate spate of words. With his eyes holding hers hypnotically, Logan's fingers moved sensuously over her skin. Pulling her closer, he brushed his lips over her cheek, murmuring, "You know why I don't want anyone else around?"

Lisa felt the silken web of danger enfolding her, and with a tremendous effort, she looked away from the flame in those burning blue eyes. "I think you've had a little too much sun," she said in an unsteady voice.

He laughed. "Do you think the sight of you in those two ridiculous little scraps has inflamed my male lust? I've seen you in less, remember," he said softly.

How could he be cruel enough to remind her of that awful night? "Why are you dragging that up now?" she cried.

"Because I want you." His hands were on her waist, drawing her gently closer. She quickly put her palms against his chest. "Don't look so startled, little rosebud." He laughed. "I don't mean here. But I do want you."

"What happened to all that talk about saving myself for someone I really loved?"

A curtain seemed to drop in back of his eyes. "That was before I knew your views on marriage," he said smoothly.

She looked blank. "What does that have to do with it?"

"Quite a lot. You see, Lisa, you are very innocent. You don't know how powerfully the act of love can affect you. It's very common for a girl to imagine herself madly in love with the first man she's been with. Especially an experienced man." His voice grew husky as he gently traced the shape of her mouth. "I can give you pleasure like you never dreamed of. I can light a fire in that beautiful body that will lift you to the stars."

Her heart was thundering as his long fingers trailed sensuously down her throat and across the soft swell of her breasts above the bikini top. But along with the raging excitement was a burning anger.

"It's very kind of you to offer to initiate me," she said bitingly. "I'd be more impressed if it weren't done so cold-bloodedly." Her eyes flashed with dislike. "Let me put it this way—I'm not interested."

Whirling around, she started swiftly up the beach. Looking straight ahead, she said stiffly, "I'll be on the first flight home."

"Why would you want to do that?"

At the amusement in his voice, she faced him. "I assumed...I mean, you wouldn't want me around if—"

Logan chuckled. "Lisa, this isn't the end of the world. I propositioned you and you turned me down. It's no big deal." He shrugged.

"I don't suppose it's ever happened to you before," she said.

"Not often," he conceded. "But I'll survive."

On the ride back to the hotel, Logan acted as though nothing had happened. It was an effort for Lisa to

match his casual tone and she envied the way he managed it so easily. Of course his heart wasn't involved, as hers was.

Lisa sighed and looked out the window, blinking away hopeless tears. Unless she could reconcile herself to never seeing Logan again, she would have to make very sure to keep him at arm's length.

THEIR STAY ON Pago Pago was all too brief for Lisa, although the yacht that Logan hired eased the pain of parting. It was a sleek white cruiser fitted out with every luxury, and Lisa wished the trip was longer than just overnight.

Dinner that evening was a relaxed affair in the handsome dining room, after which they all moved to a large salon. Through the broad windows she could see the moon spreading a silver carpet on the inky water. It drew her irresistibly and she quietly slipped away.

The sky was peppered with millions of stars. Lisa was staring at them in rapt admiration when a deep voice broke into her reverie. "Are you all right?" Logan asked.

"Yes, of course. It's so beautiful out here, I just couldn't stay inside."

"Yes, it's very beautiful," he said softly.

"When you look up at all those stars, it makes your troubles seem insignificant, doesn't it?"

"Do you have troubles, Lisa?"

"Not really. Not compared to some people, I suppose."

"I wouldn't like to think that I'd caused any of your troubles."

"You haven't." But she couldn't look at him.

"I wish you'd said that with a little more conviction," he said wryly. "Is what happened at the beach still bothering you?"

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

He cupped her chin in his hand, gently turning her head so she had to look at him. "Then put it out of your mind. Let's just go back to being friends, shall we?"

She gave him a tremulous smile. "I'd like that."

He squeezed her hand briefly and Lisa gave a small sigh. Logan obviously found her easy to give up. She wished she could turn off her own emotions as easily.

THE NEXT MORNING everyone was up early for their arrival in Nukualofa, the capital city of Tonga, another tropical paradise.

An ancient bus stood waiting at the dock, its sides gaily decorated with palm fronds and exotic red and yellow ginger blossoms. Its lack of windows were referred to as natural air conditioning. Nothing could have provided a more striking contrast to the luxury of the yacht, yet nobody seemed to mind.

When the others fanned out to inspect one site, Lisa drifted toward the ocean, pausing to appreciate the aptly named flame trees covered with brilliant red blooms. Climbing down a low embankment, she had a breathtaking view of the island, like a low green crescent with leafy arms spread wide to embrace the sparkling blue water. There wasn't a ship on the horizon or a plane in the sky.

They all trooped back to the bus and proceeded around the island, stopping

when some location looked especially promising.

They were heading back to the yacht when Ted, the photographer, said, "You don't need me any longer, do you, Logan? I was thinking maybe I'd catch the inter-island plane back to Pago Pago for the night flight home. That way I can have these pictures developed by the time you return."

Logan looked thoughtful. "That's a good idea, Ted. In fact, you can all go back and work up your reports. Lisa and I will return the yacht and catch the mid-morning flight."

There was a moment's silence. Then everyone but Lisa started to talk at once. The thought of being all alone on the yacht with Logan was an unexpected complication. She didn't want to be alone with him; more because she didn't trust herself than the other way way around.

When they were back on board, she said tentatively, "Maybe I should go back with them, Logan."

"But I want to dictate my impressions of both islands and the advantages and disadvantages of each," he told her.

"You mean tonight, on the way back to Pago Pago?"

"That's the general idea." He raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Unless you have something else in mind."

She colored a delicate pink. "No, of course not!"

THE SMALL CABIN that housed the typewriter was warm, even though Lisa opened the sliding glass windows. Logan's observations were extensive, and by the time they were transcribed, she felt hot and sticky.

She found him lying on a deck chair in the shade. He had changed into white shorts and was working on a clipboard propped against his knees, a tall iced drink on the table next to him.

"Here are your notes," Lisa said shortly.

"Thank you." He squinted into the sun. "You look like you've been in a sauna."

"It was hot inside," she said resentfully.

"I would have brought the typewriter out here."

"It doesn't matter, I'm through now."

"Why don't you get into your suit and join me? It's cool under the awning."

Lisa decided it would be childish to refuse. Besides, the brisk breeze off the ocean was irresistible. After a refreshing shower, she put on a pair of brief yellow shorts and a matching halter top.

A deck chair had been placed next to Logan's, with a tall, frosted glass on the table next to it. "I ordered you some lemonade," he said. "Is that all right?"

"Perfect," she said gratefully.

"Would you like to have dinner here on deck?"

"Oh, Logan, could we? That would be lovely."

FOR DINNER Lisa changed to a filmy cotton print. The sky was sequined with stars that winked back at the flickering candles on the white draped table. Crystal wineglasses sparkled in the light that also illuminated the centerpiece of exotic flowers.

"It's so beautiful I feel like I'm part of an illustration in a brochure!" she exclaimed.

"You could very well be," Logan said huskily. His white slacks were topped by a black silk shirt, unbuttoned almost to the waist. "What can I fix you to drink?"

"Anything," she murmured, "as long as it's not too strong."

"Don't worry." He grinned. "I know your capacity." Then he mercifully changed the subject. "Tell me your impression of the South Sea islands?"

"They're simply marvelous, so peaceful and unspoiled."

"Progress is catching up with them, though. You should have seen Pago Pago in the days before jets."

"You've been here before?"

He nodded. "Some time ago. Fortunately, there are some things even progress can't change—the magnificent harbor entrance to Pago Pago, for instance. That's really why I elected to take the yacht back—to see it again."

That sounded a death knell to any romantic dreams Lisa might still be cherishing. In the deep recesses of her heart, she hoped Logan had chosen to sail back so as to be alone with her.

She said brightly, "I can't wait to see it from a ship either."

"You'll have to get up early then. The captain tells me we round the first bend soon after seven."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," she assured him. "Can you lend me an alarm clock?"

"Wouldn't you rather be awakened like Sleeping Beauty?" he teased, then took her hand, kissing the palm. "Don't panic, rosebud, I'll find an alarm clock for you."

The evening flew by on enchanted wings—too swiftly for Lisa, who would have liked it to go on forever. It was Logan who finally called a halt, sighing, “I don’t suppose I can put off those stockholder reports any longer. I brought them with me and I haven’t even looked at them.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, this is one-man torture.” He smiled. “Good night, Lisa.”

She had undressed and put on a sleep teddy, something the saleslady had assured her was the latest thing. It was a tiny scrap of candlelight satin, the brief legs as well as the bosom trimmed with deep insets of lace. The front closed—barely—with a thin satin ribbon that matched the narrow ones over the shoulder. It was a frivolous, expensive little garment that Lisa had been unable to resist, assuaging her conscience with the excuse that the teddy would be cool in the tropics.

She had just finished brushing her hair when there was a knock on the door. “Who... who is it?” she called.

“It’s Logan. I have your alarm clock.”

She glanced around for something to put on. Her robe was already packed at the bottom of her suitcase, with everything else but the suit she would wear home. She opened the door a crack and stuck her bare arm out.

Logan pushed the door open. “I have to show you how to work this thing, Lisa. I got it from one of the crewmen and he says—” As he saw her, his eyes turned a smoky blue, traveling slowly down the enticing figure. “I must say that’s an improvement over my pajama top.”

Her hands nervously smoothed the satin over her slim thighs. “I didn’t have... Oh, just give me the clock and go!”

He moved toward her and Lisa caught her breath. “That’s not what you really want, Lisa. Admit it.”

“No! I mean, yes, it is!” she gasped.

He was towering over her now. His fingers touched her petal-soft cheek, trailing down to trace the trembling mouth. Her senses drank in everything about him as long fingers toyed with the satin bow between her breasts, slowly untying it. “Tell me that you don’t want me and I’ll leave.”

The neckline was open now almost to the waist and Logan’s hand slipped inside, cupping the fullness of one breast, his thumb making a slow circle on the rosy tip. A long shudder ran through Lisa. “Oh, Logan,” she sighed.

Gathering her in his arms he gave a low, throaty cry of triumph as his mouth captured hers. Lisa surrendered, knowing only that she could no longer deny either of them. Her arms went around his neck and she ran her fingers lovingly through his thick hair. Logan groaned, molding her willing body to his hard length and burying his face in her neck.

He claimed her mouth again, lifting and carrying her to the bed. Sinking down beside her without relinquishing her lips, he fondled her body with sensual caresses. Lisa quivered under the long, drugging kisses, her body on fire with delight.

His mouth trailed over the white skin her bikini had preserved from the sun. “You have such a beautiful body, my darling. I want to touch every inch of you.”

"I know," she murmured, sliding her hand inside his shirt. She, too, wanted to explore every part of him.

"I need you, Lisa," Logan said harshly, tangling his hands in her bright hair. "Don't ever leave me!"

Her drugged senses took a minute to register the hoarse cry. Surely he didn't mean that? She was so inexperienced. Was this what all men said when they were making love?

Sensing her sudden tension, Logan lifted his head. Their eyes met, and his sardonic smile chilled her. "Don't get excited, I'm not asking for a commitment from you."

Her aching body longed for him, but Lisa's mind couldn't accept this latest rejection. How could he make such passionate love to her and still hold back part of himself? "Don't worry," she said bitterly. "I don't have any long-term plans where you're concerned."

A look that she would have called pain, if she hadn't known better, crossed his face. "It doesn't matter, Lisa. Let me be the first. Let me teach you about love—"

His mouth captured hers, probing with a masculine expertise that left her senses reeling. It was a huge temptation to give in to him, yet Lisa knew that her torment would be even greater if she allowed him to initiate her into an ecstasy she could only guess at.

Summoning strength from an unknown source, Lisa dragged herself out of his arms. "It's no good, Logan. Neither of us wants a commitment. You said you would leave if I told you I didn't want you." She bent her head to hide the unbearable torture in her eyes. "I'll say it. I don't want you."

She heard his sharply indrawn breath, yet it barely penetrated her misery. Every quivering inch of her unfulfilled body reproached her more than he ever could. But Logan didn't utter a word.

When he strode from the cabin, part of her died. Lisa had to bite down hard on her knuckles to keep from begging him to come back.

*

LISA GAZED pensively out of her office window. The fact that she was still working at Magnum Studios continued to amaze her. After that night on the yacht, she had never expected to see Logan again once they returned to Los Angeles. Just facing him the next day had been a nightmare!

But he had confounded her as always. While he couldn't by any stretch of the imagination be called friendly, his manner was polite.

And as it turned out, his regular secretary, Mrs. Livingstone, originally due back in a week, telephoned with the news that there had been complications. She wouldn't be back for at least two more weeks, maybe three.

Lisa was too upset by the idea of having to stay longer. It was torture to be around Logan every day and be treated like a useful piece of furniture.

Another thing that troubled Lisa was the fact that she hadn't been able to pay back any of the money he had spent on nurses. He was giving her a handsome salary, but so far it had all gone toward the bills that had accumulated while she was sick.

It was a lonely time for Lisa. She had been in Los Angeles for such a short time that she hadn't made any

friends. She had acquaintances at the studio, but that's all they were.

One Friday night after work, Lisa decided to do some necessary marketing—a task she wasn't fond of. Her purchases filled two large bags that she juggled uncomfortably as she rummaged for car keys that proved elusive.

"Oh, no!" Lisa exclaimed suddenly. She had locked her keys in the car!

"I beg your pardon?" A tall blond man paused in the act of opening the door of a Cadillac parked next to the Morris. "Were you talking to me?"

"No, I was talking to myself—or maybe to God. He's the only one who can help me," Lisa muttered. "I locked my keys in the car."

"Well, maybe I can help you." A smile lit his brown eyes. "It seems a shame to bother God with such a small problem." He reached into his car, taking a camel hair jacket off its hanger and tossing it on the seat.

She watched curiously as he straightened the hanger, making a hook at one end. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"A little trick known to car thieves and law-abiding folk as well." He forced the wire between the window and the rubber strip, maneuvering it until the hook was over the lock button. A sharp upward tug, and it popped up. Opening the door, he swept Lisa a mock bow. "Your chariot, milady."

"That was fantastic! How can I ever thank you?"

He smiled at her animated face. "You could have a drink with me."

"Oh... I... I'm sorry, but—"

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Bruce Devereaux, thirty-seven, unmarried, well-liked by dogs and children. I am also gainfully employed as an independent producer, currently finishing a movie and about to start a television show."

"Are you really?" Lisa exclaimed. "I'm in movies too."

He looked at her more closely. "You are? I'm sure I would have remembered that face. What have you done?"

She laughed. "I meant I work at Magnum Studios."

"We can't stand here in the parking lot. Let's go have a drink in there." He indicated a small bar in the shopping center. "You're free to go whenever you like."

Lisa allowed herself to be persuaded. Besides, he seemed very pleasant and he *had* done her a great service.

"What do you do at Magnum?" Bruce asked. "And by the way, what's your name?"

"It's Lisa Brooks, and I work for Logan Marshall. I'm filling in for his private secretary. It's a temporary job."

"That's fortunate. Nobody should be sentenced to life with the tyrant of the tower."

"You know Logan?" When he nodded, Lisa said, "It doesn't sound as though you like him."

Bruce shrugged. "We've tangled a few times. But I don't work for him, so he can't tell me what to do."

"He has always been very kind to me." *For the most part*, Lisa added silently.

Bruce's eyes wandered over her. "I'm sure of that."

"Logan and I are just friends," Lisa said stiffly.

"Okay, if you say so. I think he's crazy, but I'm delighted to hear it." Bruce gave her a mischievous smile. "How about a game of tennis tomorrow?"

At first Lisa refused, her objections crumbling when Bruce suggested she meet him at the courts. If she arrived and left in her own car, it wasn't a real date, was it? And she was so tired of being alone.

To her surprise, the afternoon was a great success. Bruce was a good player, besides being a great deal of fun. After the game they had lunch at his tennis club. When he asked her to take a ride to Malibu for lunch the next day, Lisa accepted without hesitation.

IT WAS A sparkling Sunday afternoon, tailor-made for a drive to the beach. They stopped at an excellent seafood restaurant just off the highway, where the food was superb. Bruce was charming. He seemed to accept the fact that she was only interested in friendship, never stepping over the line.

As they were leaving the restaurant, he said, "A friend of mine has a rather unique house in the compound. It's all redwood and glass with a pretty spectacular view. Would you like to see it?"

The compound was a private area of expensive, unique homes, guarded by a gatehouse. The Pacific Ocean was their front yard.

"I'd like that very much, but should we call first?" Lisa asked.

"It isn't necessary. People drift in and out all day."

When they arrived, Bruce opened the door without bothering to ring the bell. No one would have heard it any-

way. The big living room was filled with people standing in groups, all talking over the noise of the stereo.

"Which one is the host?" Lisa asked.

Leading her over to a short, curly-haired man in tight jeans and sandals, Bruce said, "Meet Rudy Mandell, the best cameraman in the business."

Rudy acknowledged the introduction, then said to Bruce, "At last you brought me one I don't have to shoot through filters." He took Lisa's chin in his hand, turning her head. "Exquisite! No bad angles."

"Sorry to disappoint you, pal, she isn't an actress."

"But she has a perfect face!" Rudy's eyes swept over her. "The rest of her is pretty spectacular too."

Lisa blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Mandell. The only problem is that I don't know how to act."

"Since when has that stopped anyone?" He snorted. "Oh, I get it, you're a model."

"No, I'm a secretary."

"She works for Logan Marshall," Bruce said. The two men exchanged glances.

"Oh, I see," Rudy murmured.

No you don't see! Lisa wanted to shout.

"I hope you know what you're doing, man," Rudy murmured. Taking Bruce by the arm, he said to Lisa, "Would you excuse us for a few minutes?"

She wandered over to the window where she could look at the view and not have to talk to anyone. There was a couple in the corner she was heading for, the woman a movie star of some magnitude. Her hand gently stroked

the sleeve of the man who towered over her.

Curious in spite of herself, Lisa looked to see who he was. Her heart gave a sudden lurch. It was Logan!

Lisa reached for the windowsill to steady herself, and a glass on the ledge fell with a clatter. Luckily it was plastic, but the clatter attracted Logan's attention.

"Can I do some—" The polite words were cut off abruptly. "Lisa! What are you doing here?"

She smiled brightly. "The same thing you are, I imagine."

"I didn't know you knew Mandell." He scowled.

"Logan!" His companion recalled his attention sharply.

"Excuse me, my dear. Monica Miles, this is Lisa Brooks."

The woman looked from Lisa to Logan. "One of your new little starlets, darling?"

"As a matter of fact, Lisa is my secretary," Logan informed her smoothly.

Monica's eyebrows rose, but before she could comment, a man materialized at her side. "Monica, darling, I've been trying to tell that delicious story of yours about Zippoli, and I can't get it right. You'll have to do it." His arm around her shoulders urged her toward a group at the other end of the room.

"I'm waiting for an explanation, Lisa," Logan's angry voice reminded her as soon as they were alone.

"I don't have to explain anything to you," she flared.

"You know I don't want you around these people."

Without either of them noticing his approach, Bruce joined them, draping his arm casually over Lisa's shoulders.

"Sorry, love. Rudy always has some piece of business that can't wait."

He couldn't have come at a more opportune time. Lisa gazed up with an adoring look that made him blink. "That's all right, I understand," she said throatily.

If Bruce noticed the tension between the two, he gave no indication. "Hi, Logan, good to see you again."

Logan's frosty glance rested on the encircling arm. "I didn't know you knew my secretary, Devereaux. Where did you two meet?"

"In the parking lot of the Safeway market," Lisa answered, knowing it would get a reaction.

Logan didn't disappoint her. "The cut-rate one?"

"Don't you think that's a little insulting, old man?" said Bruce. "You and I have had our run-ins, but that's no reason to be offensive."

"I know your reputation with women, Devereaux."

Bruce gave a sharp laugh. "Coming from the stud of the Western world, that's very funny."

"I'm not interested in your opinion of my morals. I'm telling you to stay away from Lisa."

"Only when I hear it from the lady herself—and so far she hasn't made any complaints," Bruce added.

"Why you—!" Logan gripped the other man's shirt. Their faces were only inches apart.

Lisa tried to push them apart. "Stop it this minute, you two. I won't be fought over like some bone."

For a moment it seemed she wouldn't be successful. Then the two men drew slowly apart.

"I want to go home," Lisa told Bruce.

"I'm sorry, honey." Bruce's smile was tentative.

Logan didn't try to placate her. His frown showed his continuing displeasure. "Lisa—"

"Don't say it, Logan," she warned. "Don't say *anything*! I don't think I could take much more."

LOGAN WAS OUT of the office most of the time during the next days. Without the electric charge of his personality, everything was predictably routine, but there was a strange undercurrent around the studio that bothered Lisa. The mystery was solved when she came back from a solitary lunch to find a newspaper on her desk, carefully folded to a Hollywood gossip column. One paragraph was circled in red:

Rumor has it that all is not well between the big movie mogul and his secretary (the temporary one). Although he put the Off Limits sign on her around his own studio, the lady found an independent who wasn't intimidated. Pretty risky, we say. The Big Guy can marshal up a lot of revenge, and he brooks no competition.

The paper fluttered from Lisa's nerveless fingers. The writer hadn't left anything to guesswork, had he? He'd actually used their names.

A wave of helpless rage swept over Lisa and she marched next door to Logan's office, throwing open the door without bothering to knock. He was on the telephone and paused, looking up in surprise.

"I want to talk to you," she told him.

He hung up, then regarded her with raised eyebrows. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't it customary to knock?"

She didn't dignify that with an answer. Waving the newspaper, she demanded, "Have you read this?"

He took it from her. His face hardened as he read. "Where did you get this?"

"Someone was kind enough to leave it on my desk."

He got up swiftly. "You shouldn't let this trash upset you. Haven't you learned by now what people in this industry are capable of?"

"Including you?" Lisa's emerald eyes sent out sparks of fire. "How *could* you, Logan? How could you deliberately give the impression that I was your private property?"

His eyes narrowed. "You choose to believe that tripe?"

"How can I help it? You've always warned me against movie people, but I didn't think you'd go to these lengths."

He folded his arms. "I'm sorry you're so upset at missing out on a few dates, but I never uttered a single word of prohibition."

"You have other ways of making your displeasure known. No one on this lot would risk crossing you."

Logan rounded the desk, towering over her menacingly. "I don't have to justify myself to you."

"The great Logan Marshall lives by his own rules, is that it?"

His fingers bit into her shoulders. "I'd like to shake some sense into that empty little head of yours."

"No one appointed you my guardian," she said furiously. "I'm a grown woman and I'm entitled to make my

own mistakes." Pulling out of his grip, she started for the door.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

She turned. "You were right about one thing. I don't like this business. I'm getting out."

"You're leaving me in the lurch?" he asked.

"Oh, Logan, don't be ridiculous! You don't need me—you never did."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"That's my problem, not yours," she told him.

Lisa cleared her desk out swiftly, half afraid that Logan would come after her. When he didn't, she breathed a sigh of relief, mixed with just a slight twinge of disappointment.

She marched out of the building and down to her parking space, wheeling her car out the gate for the last time. The momentum of her anger carried her that far, but practicality soon intruded. What was she going to do now?

While she was driving around aimlessly, a thought started to take shape. She did have one friend in this town—Bruce. With his wide connections, he might know of a secretarial job available. She stopped at the first phone booth she saw.

It seemed like an endless amount of time until they located him, causing Lisa to have second thoughts. She was on the point of hanging up when Bruce's voice sounded in her ear.

"Lisa, darling, this is an unexpected surprise."

His genuine warmth brought tears to her eyes. "Oh, Bruce," was all she could manage.

"What's the matter, honey? You sound like you're crying."

"No, I...I'm fine. I quit my job with Logan."

"Good! You can come to work for me," Bruce said decisively. "Get your delectable self over here as fast as possible."

THE LARGE SOUND stage was being set up for another scene, the huge klieg lights temporarily darkened. Bruce came over to Lisa with a clipboard in his hand holding pages of script.

"You're busy," she said. "I shouldn't be here."

"Nonsense, I'm never too busy for you." He took her arm, steering her into a small office. "Whatever has you this upset is something I want to know about now. It involves Logan, doesn't it? What did he do to you?"

"He didn't..." Lisa took a deep breath. "Did you read 'Hollywood Hot Line' today?"

Bruce shook his head. "But it should be here someplace." After locating it, he scanned the column. "I see," he said slowly.

"So will everyone else," she cried. "But it isn't true!"

"What did Logan say?"

"He was angry. He said he hadn't warned anyone to stay away from me."

"There is more than one way to build a fence," Bruce said dryly. "How do you feel about him?"

Lisa glanced over his shoulder. "I... He's been very kind to me. He helped me when I was very sick once."

"That's all it is, just gratitude?" he persisted.

"Of course." She forced herself to meet his searching gaze. "That also explains Logan's solicitude. We be-

came very friendly when I was convalescing and he regards me as sort of a . . . a kid sister."

Bruce's skepticism showed; however, he decided not to pursue the subject. "Well, it's over in any case. What are you going to do now?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I thought you might know of someone who needs a secretary."

"You're wasted behind a typewriter, honey. How would you like to be an actress?"

"I wouldn't have the first idea of what to do," she said.

"You don't have to, I'll lead you by the hand. We're starting a new TV show next week and there's a small part you could do as a way of getting your feet wet." He rummaged around the cluttered desk. "There's a working script here somewhere. Ah, here it is. It's the part of Carrie. Take it home and learn the lines. Tomorrow I'll expect you to read for me."

"Bruce, I appreciate your generosity, but—"

"I forgot to mention the salary," he interrupted. The figure made her gasp. "Does that change your mind?"

Lisa had been determined to turn down what she was sure was an act of charity. The amount of money made her pause. The low state of her cash reserve was worrying—and the alternative was going back to sales work. Lisa decided to take it.

"If you're sure I won't cause you any embarrassment," she said.

"It's going to be a pleasure having you around," Bruce assured her, putting his arm around her shoulders.

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THE FIRST DAY on the set, Lisa was terrified. It had been bad enough auditioning for Bruce, but at least he was a friend. She credited his enthusiasm to that, refusing to believe him when he said she had a natural talent.

"I mean it, Lisa. Of course there's all kinds of stage business to learn, but that's purely mechanical. The important thing is that you have a rare kind of believability."

The director agreed with him, while the cameraman was entranced with the perfect contours of her face and figure, as Rudy Mandell had been.

The only cloud on the horizon was Belva Crystal, the star of the show they were filming. She was a mature actress on the verge of being phased into character parts, and had an almost paranoid suspicion of younger actresses.

Lisa played the role of the star's younger sister. Except for Belva's criticism and occasional outbursts, the job was easy enough. Everyone on the set was friendly, and Bruce was tremendously supportive.

Their friendship was something she came to depend on. They had frequent dates now, and if he sometimes tried to make love to her, when she indicated that he was out of line, Bruce never pursued it.

Lisa refused to think of the past, building protective layers around her heart that were ripped to shreds by one phone call from Logan.

"Lisa?" The deep voice did funny things to her pulse. "How are you getting along?"

"Just . . . just fine," she quavered.

"Are you working?"

"Yes." She contented herself with the one word.

"Back at the department store?" he asked grimly.

"No," she stammered. "I'm working for Bruce."

"Doing what?" The two words were encased in ice.

"I'm...I'm working on a television show of his."

"I have all night, Lisa," Logan said implacably.

"All right, I'm acting!" she cried. "It beats selling dresses at Bullock's."

There was a short silence. Then, "Congratulations, Lisa. You really had me fooled." The contempt in his voice made her flinch. "You were after an acting career all along, weren't you?"

His withering scorn desolated her. Logan was convinced that she was just a cheap opportunist. His anger fairly crackled across the line as quietly she hung up the phone.

THE NEXT DAY her eyes were heavy from lack of sleep.

"Is anything wrong, honey?" Bruce asked.

"Just an attack of nerves." Lisa smiled wanly. "I guess it's just occurred to me how many people will see this show we're filming."

Bruce put his arms about her waist, twirling her around. "This is just the beginning, baby. Today a bit part, tomorrow the world."

The day of the wrap, as the finish of the show was called, Bruce told her about a party being held that night.

"It's at Will Westbury's home, the big banker. Wait till you see his estate, it's a real stunner."

Lisa honestly didn't want to go, yet it was little enough to do for Bruce, so she agreed.

She dressed carefully that night, wanting to be a credit to him. Unfortunately, the only evening gown she had was the green chiffon she had worn at that fateful dinner. When she stepped into it, Lisa had an unpleasant premonition.

It wasn't in evidence when Bruce picked her up. Her shining auburn hair was pulled up and back, trailing masses of waves and ringlets down her slender neck. Artful makeup made her eyes look like faceted emeralds, matching the color of the seductive gown that clung to her body. Her skin had a creamy glow and a touch of gloss highlighted her full, sensitive mouth.

Bruce's reaction was a low wolf whistle. "When I said I was bringing the most beautiful girl in this town, I should have made that the world!"

The party was held in a Bel-Air mansion that was everything he had promised. A curving driveway cut through manicured lawns to a large pink house with ornamental grillwork.

A broad entry hall led through to the patio. Beyond it, a huge swimming pool shaped like a four-leaf-clover was lit with underwater lights. Gardenias bobbed on its surface.

The guests who weren't gathered around the buffet tables or bars were dancing under a huge red and white tent that had been erected, along with a portable dance floor, on the spacious lawn.

"I feel like I just stepped into a 1950s musical," Lisa murmured.

"Will would be delighted. That was his era," said Bruce.

As though answering to his name, a tall, distinguished, silver-haired man joined them. "Bruce, how nice to see you." He held out his hand. "And who is the charming young lady?"

"Lisa Brooks, may I present Wilroy P. Westbury."

"Call me Will," he said, taking Lisa's hand. "You're new in town, aren't you, my dear. What do you think of our city?"

"It's lovely. And so is your home," she said.

"Would you like me to show you around?" Will asked.

Bruce spoke up. "I think Lisa needs a drink first. She has a parched look." He took her arm firmly. "Come along to the bar, darling. We'll see you later, Will."

"I would have liked to see the house," she protested.

"Your tour would have consisted of one room—his bedroom," Bruce informed her. "He's a lecherous old goat, but he can do a lot for a girl if he likes her."

"That's disgusting!"

"I thought you'd feel that way." He laughed. "Have a drink and relax, honey."

Their progress to the bar was slow, since Bruce was greeted repeatedly. Lisa met so many people that she couldn't remember their names, except for the ones recognizable as TV or movie personalities. It was indeed a glittering assemblage.

The conversation was mainly shop-talk, and after a while, Lisa edged away, murmuring something about going to the powder room. The bartender was supplying a fresh drink to Bruce, who smiled vaguely and told her to hurry back:

As she got to the patio, a man blocked her path.

"Well, hello. I haven't seen you before," he told Lisa.

It was Craig Bohrman, an actor who played the detective in a popular weekly series. He was quite handsome, if shorter than he appeared on television.

"Who do you belong to?" he asked.

"I don't belong to anyone," she said coldly.

"Aw, come on, baby. Loosen up and be friendly." His hand fastened around her waist.

Lisa struggled. "Would you kindly let go of me?"

A deep voice interrupted them. "The lady isn't one of your fans, Craig. I suggest you buzz off."

Lisa looked up into Logan's cold blue eyes as the actor gave an embarrassed laugh and released her.

"Sure, Logan, uh... we were just kidding around."

Craig faded into the crowd, leaving Lisa to stare wordlessly up at Logan. He looked so handsome in evening clothes.

"Should I apologize for chasing off your latest conquest?" he asked.

"Oh, no, I'm very grateful," she said. "He... was rather unpleasant."

"But typical of what you'll meet here. Congratulations, by the way. You hit the big time fast. An invitation to one of Westbury's parties isn't easy to come by."

"I don't suppose I was actually invited," said Lisa. "I'm here with Bruce."

Logan's face hardened, yet his voice remained casual. "You would be welcome with or without a date. Will dotes

on beautiful women. Wait until he sees you."

"He already has," Lisa said shortly.

Logan gave a bark of humorless laughter. "You do get around, don't you? But who am I to sit in judgment? With the face of an angel and the body of Circe, why shouldn't you parlay them into fame and fortune?"

"I never wanted to be an actress," she cried. "I still don't. It was just a way of—" She stopped as his strong hand closed around her throat, the long fingers digging into the side of her neck before relaxing in a caress.

"I suppose I should be flattered that you care enough about my good opinion to lie, but it isn't necessary, Lisa. The only thing I regret is that you weren't honest with me in the beginning. I could have done as much for you as Bruce—with no strings attached." He forced her chin up. "Did Bruce solve the compelling mystery for you, or was that all a lie too?" he asked harshly.

She jerked her chin away, running blindly toward the house. In the powder room, Lisa locked the door, leaning against it until her pounding heart slowed its beat. How could Logan believe such vile things about her?

After a great while, she forced herself to rejoin the party. Lisa didn't realize how long she had been gone until she found Bruce at a different bar, and noticed the flush on his cheekbones. He had evidently had quite a few drinks.

His voice was steady though. "I was about to send out a search party, honey. Willy didn't corner you, did he?"

"No, I . . . I was just talking to some people."

"Good," he said. "Are you having a good time?"

"Yes, lovely," she answered brightly.

More people joined them and Lisa made an effort to join in the conversation. When someone asked her to dance she accepted. Then someone else escorted her to the buffet table where she filled a plate that she barely touched. Lisa couldn't complain about being neglected, but she was conscious of Logan watching her from a distance, a sardonic smile on his mouth.

After what seemed like weeks, Lisa couldn't take any more. There was no question of asking Bruce if he was ready to leave; he looked set for the night. What she needed was a breather, Lisa decided.

Beyond the lighted party area, the estate stretched on for acres. White wrought-iron benches gleamed in the deep shadows, drawing Lisa to sink down on one. It was so restful, with the music muted pleasantly at this distance, and the grass muffled approaching footsteps. She yelped when a hand stroked her cheek.

"What are you doing out here all alone?" Bruce asked.

"You startled me," she gasped.

"I didn't mean to," he apologized.

"I didn't mean to neglect you either."

"You didn't," she said quickly.

"People have been very nice to me."

"Other men, you mean. Don't think I didn't see them trying to make time with my girl."

"I'm not your girl," Lisa said gently.

He sat down on the bench next to her, taking one of her hands and kiss-

ing the palm. "I'd like you to be, you know."

"Bruce, I thought we agreed—"

"I know. We agreed to be friends. It was a great idea except that it won't work. We have to talk, Lisa."

"At a party?" she asked, starting to rise.

He caught her wrist, pulling her down beside him.

"I told you, Bruce—"

"And I'm telling you the way I want it to be," he broke in. "I'm a normal male, Lisa, and I can't be with you without wanting to make love to you."

"Then I guess we'll have to stop seeing each other," she said.

"You don't mean that." His hand slid under her long hair, pulling her head forward, and his mouth closed over hers, forcing it to open to the invasion of his tongue. She could taste the Scotch he had consumed and her nose wrinkled with distaste. When she tried to push him away his arms tightened painfully, but she finally succeeded in breaking his hold.

"You're drunk," she accused coldly.

He shook his head. "I'm only saying what I would have gotten around to sooner or later. I want you, Lisa, and I can make you want me, too."

"Bruce, I told you when we met how it would have to be."

"I intend to change your mind."

He gripped her wrists, pulling her arms behind her back and securing them there with one hand while his other continued to caress her. His body half covered her as he forced her back along the bench, his breathing harsh.

Lisa felt a flash of terror as she looked up at his passion-swollen face. His arousal was all too evident when he covered her shrinking body with his,

rendering her helpless by his weight. She struggled frantically, knowing it was useless, just as pleading with him would be.

Almost exhausted by her struggles, Lisa felt Bruce's crushing weight abruptly lifted from her. She looked up to see Logan's furious face glaring down at her. As though in a trance, she watched as he aimed a murderous right to Bruce's jaw. Bruce went down almost in slow motion, and Lisa sprang to her feet.

"What did he do to you?" Logan demanded grimly.

"Nothing. You came along before he—" Her voice broke. "Oh, Logan!" She buried her face against him.

He stroked her hair, making soothing sounds as sobs racked her body. When she was finally quiet, he took off his jacket and put it around her.

"Come on, I'm taking you home," he said tightly.

INSIDE HER apartment, Lisa turned toward Logan. Bitter humor curled his mouth. All the tenderness he had briefly shown was gone now.

"What provoked Bruce tonight? Were you trying to walk out on him too?" he asked. "Did you make better connections at the party? Like Westbury?"

The contempt in his voice snapped Lisa's control. She stood up to him, eyes blazing. "All right, you guessed it. Westbury made me a better offer. Is that what you want to hear?"

He stared at her with untamed fury. "If I thought that—"

"Why does it shock you?" she broke in. "Isn't that how girls get ahead in this town? Why should I be any different?"

"Stop it!" He shook her so savagely that her fine, silky hair flew into disarray. "You're lying!" he snarled.

Suddenly, the fight went out of Lisa. "Of course I'm lying, but you won't believe that either." Tears welled up in her eyes.

Logan gently touched her wet cheek, his face tortured. "Lisa, I'm sorry. I—"

She turned away. "Just go, Logan," she said wearily.

His arms went around her waist, pulling her back against him. "You need me, Lisa. Don't you know that yet?" She shook her head, trying to break away. "Come back, Lisa. Let me take care of you."

His hand slid up to touch her breasts. The sensation caused a shudder of desire even though she willed her body not to react. It was no use. Logan could tell. She had to make an effort, though.

"Let me go, Logan," she pleaded in a low voice.

His teeth gently worked the soft skin of her earlobe while his fingertips lightly skimmed her breasts, pausing at the hardened peaks. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes," she said.

"Look at me and tell me that." His lips brushed hers in a tantalizing caress. "Say it now, Lisa."

She couldn't. He was so close that their breath mingled, yet it wasn't close enough. If he didn't kiss her soon Lisa felt she would lose control and beg him to.

As though recognizing her need, Logan's head bent slowly to hers, his lips teasing hers apart with a practiced sensuality. Lisa's trembling body was molded to his hard lines, further se-

ducing her will to resist. She touched his neck with tentative little caresses. She wanted him so much, wanted his mouth to continue its fiery exploration, wanted his hands to explore every part of her eager body.

With a sigh of surrender, she relaxed against him, twining her slim fingers in his thick dark hair. He lifted her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom, then put her gently on the bed, lying beside her and cradling her tenderly. A low chuckle of triumph sounded in his throat as her arms stole around his neck.

"You're mine, Lisa. You know it now, don't you?" His drugging kiss didn't allow her to answer. "You'll never get away from me again," he muttered thickly.

Her eyes fluttered open, flinching at the naked victory she saw in his. Despair chilled Lisa's blood at the look on Logan's face. He wanted her certainly, but passion wasn't the main consideration. She represented winning and losing to him.

Turning her head aside to hide the pain, she tried to draw away. "What is it, darling?" he asked.

"Let me go, Logan. I can't do it."

"Don't be frightened, sweetheart," he murmured.

She shook her head. "It isn't that. I just don't want you to make love to me. I don't want you to own me body and soul." Lisa was horrified as the revealing words slipped out.

"You're not going to do it to me again, Lisa," Logan said tauntly. "This time you've gone too far to stop. I'm going to take you." His hard mouth claimed hers in a punishing, bruising kiss which Lisa passively endured.

When he lifted his head, she looked back at him steadily.

"You're no different from Bruce, are you?" she asked quietly.

There was a long pause while Logan stared at her. Then, with a muttered oath, he got up and strode out the door.

Lisa watched him go. Then, turning facedown on the bed, she wondered how long it would take her to die.

IT DIDN'T SEEM possible that such an upheaval could be accomplished in so little time, but a short week later found Lisa ensconced in a new life. Her apartment had been a furnished one, so moving didn't pose any problem. Finding the job at Mason's department store so fast was another stroke of luck, Lisa supposed. Still, a sense of unreality enveloped her. She had cut all ties, leaving no forwarding address.

The job behind the perfume counter paid enough to live on, with a small amount left over each week for her secret fund. Now more than ever, Lisa longed to pay Logan back the money he had spent on her. It wouldn't change his opinion of her, but it was necessary for her own self-respect. If only it wasn't such slow going!

One day her anonymity was threatened. Shirley Blassick, one of the other saleswomen, cornered her. "Did you see that television play last night? *A Cup of Kindness*?"

"No, I don't watch television much," Lisa said.

"It was great. Belva Crystal starred and there was some girl in it who was the spitting image of you."

"Oh, really?" Lisa murmured.

"I didn't get her name, but she sure looks like you."

Lisa was grateful that a customer appeared just then.

Since she studiously avoided the whole entertainment page, she wasn't aware that she had caused a minor sensation. The production had been high budgeted, meriting reviews from the major critics. They were unanimous in their favorable comments on Lisa's talent, adding that they would like to see more of her exquisite face. In Hollywood, that was all that was needed to make a career take off.

Not long after, a short, paunchy man came up to her counter. "So this is where you've been hiding," he said jovially.

"I beg your pardon?" Lisa looked at him coolly.

"Don't you know everybody in town has been looking for you? You're Lisa Brooks, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I—"

"Pretty clever move, kid. Did you think it up yourself?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr.—"

"Sol Palinski," he told her. "I'm here to offer you a movie contract."

She looked at him with distaste. "Is this a joke, Mr. Palinski?"

"Call me Sol. I want you to play the lead in a new movie I'm casting. How does that grab you, sweetheart?"

"It doesn't," she told him shortly. "Will you please leave?"

The head of Lisa's department appeared at her side. "Is there any trouble, Miss Brooks?" she asked smoothly.

Sol grinned. "No trouble. Lisa and I just have some business to discuss. How about giving her a little time off?"

"That might be better than disrupting the whole department," the woman said.

Lisa refused to go any farther than the store's cafeteria, a decision Sol mildly agreed to.

"Okay, so you've convinced me that you don't want a career," he said. But how about the dough? Everybody can use cash."

"I have enough," she replied distantly.

"You mean there's nothing you want to buy?"

Lisa became very still. "How much money are you talking about?" she asked cautiously.

"Ahh, that's better." Sol mentioned an amount that made her heart beat faster. She could pay Logan back one lump sum.

"How long would it take?"

"Six weeks, maybe two months."

"All right, I'll do it," Lisa said, shaking up her mind. "But there are to be no options in the contract. A one-time deal and that's the end of it," she said firmly. Lisa had learned about options at Magnum.

He shook his head slowly. "Lady, I don't know if you're a shrewd operator or just plain crazy."

"There is one more thing," she stipulated. "I want an advance on my salary." She named the amount she owed Logan, and the producer wrote her a check on the spot.

THE SCRIPT was delivered that evening. Lisa curled up on the couch to read it, her casual interest turning to dismay as the plot unfolded. It was the story of a woman hopelessly in love with a man who didn't return that love, it wouldn't allow her to escape.

He wasn't actually like Logan, Lisa assured herself. The man in the script was consciously cruel, while the wounds Logan inflicted were often done unknowingly. The theme of unrequited love was universal too. The trouble was, it hit too close to home.

She had taken Sol Palinski's check to the bank, then written one of her own and mailed it to Logan. It had afforded Lisa a bittersweet satisfaction, putting finis as it did to their relationship. With the discharge of her debt, the last tenuous link was broken. She would never see or hear from Logan again.

*

LISA WAS smiling when she walked on the set to greet her leading man, Rod Selby, and the director, Tony Blakely. While the lights were being positioned they stood in a little knot, joking about Rod in his tuxedo and Lisa in her evening gown.

"I've come home dressed like this many a morning." He laughed. "But I've never *started* the day in evening clothes."

"I'll bet your eyes are a lot clearer now than they were then," she teased.

Putting his arm around her waist, he jerked her to him. "Are you suggesting that I'm a souse, woman?"

The laughing answer she was about to give was stilled on her lips. Over Rod's shoulder, Lisa spied Logan standing just inside the heavy metal door where a warning red light flashed on when the cameras were rolling.

Her sudden tension was transmitted to Rod. "What's the matter, honey? You're pale as a ghost."

Before she could answer, Logan sauntered over. Both men evidently

knew him, and Tony Blakely said, "This is an honor, Logan. Our little production doesn't usually get such august notice."

"I came to talk to Lisa," Logan said. "Will you excuse us?"

The question was a mere formality, understood by both men. Rod and the director withdrew immediately.

"You're looking well, Lisa," Logan said. "It seems I needn't have worried about you after all."

"I didn't know you had," she murmured.

"Oh, yes. But that little disappearing act of yours was cleverly staged, wasn't it?" His mouth curved derisively. "Did you dream it up yourself or did you have help?" His hand shot out and gripped her upper arm.

"You won't believe me unless I give the answer you expect to hear!" She tried to twist away.

"I want the truth, Lisa."

The injustice of his suspicions infuriated her. But he had come to hurl insults. Well, if that was what he wanted, she would give him reason.

She threw her head back, facing him with glittering green eyes. "By playing all the angles and using every trick in the book, I've made it to the top, Logan. I thought the disappearing act was especially clever. It brought my price up. Men always want what they can't have, don't they?" she taunted.

For a moment Logan's eyes took on a demonic light, and despair invaded Lisa's soul. Couldn't he tell she was lying? She turned away to hide the tears that threatened.

"I'm not finished with you yet," he said. "There is a little matter of this check." He thrust it at her.

"It's what I owe you," she said tonelessly.

"I don't want it," he bit out.

"Take it, Logan," she begged. "I owe it to you. It's money you spent on me."

His eyes were mocking. "I'm used to spending money on women, although I usually get more in return."

"I'm sorry I disappointed you in that respect," she said stiffly. "So, take the check, Logan. I want to be out of your debt."

In answer, he tore it into tiny pieces letting them flutter to the floor. "That's what I think of your munificent gesture," he said contemptuously.

"Why did you do that? I'll just send you another one!"

"And I'll come back here and do the same thing."

"No, you won't! I'll leave instructions to have you barred from the set."

"Will you now?" he drawled. "When don't you start now?"

She glared at him. "All right, that's the way you want it." Turning she sought the director. "Tony, would you come here please?" she called.

"What can I do for you, honey?" He smiled.

"I'd like you to ask Mr. Marshall to leave," she said stiffly.

Tony looked from one to the other. "This is a joke, isn't it?"

"It's no joke," Lisa said hotly.

But Tony looked at her in perplexity. "How could I do a thing like that?"

"I don't think she understands," Logan said gently.

"You mean she doesn't know this is a Magnum release?" Tony asked.

"What?" Lisa cried. "Sol Palinski said he was an independent producer."

"Lisa, my dear, what a lot you still have to learn about this business." Logan chuckled. "Where do you think independent producers get their backing? After they put the production together they have to scare up the money to finance it. In this case, Magnum Studios."

"I didn't know," she said. "Why didn't Sol tell me?"

Logan shrugged. "He didn't think it would matter." His smile was wolfish. "Only you and I know that it does."

"I...uh... If you don't need me anymore, there's something I want to check on." Tony wandered away.

"You didn't know I was going to be in this movie, did you?" Lisa asked Logan.

He shook his head.

"I'll get out of these clothes and leave," she said quietly. "You may not believe this, Logan, but I had no idea you were involved in this hit film. I realize you wouldn't have hired me for my part so I'm saving you the trouble of firing me. Fortunately this is only the third day of shooting. It won't cost much to scrap the footage of me."

"I have no intention of firing you," Logan said. "If Sol thinks you're right for the role, that's good enough for me."

Lisa sighed. "The whole purpose of taking this job was to earn the money to repay you—laughable, as it turns out. I'll have to find some other way."

"Another disappearing act, Lisa?" When she wouldn't look at him, Logan said, "I hate to disappoint you, but you're going to show up here until

this movie is finished. Perhaps I'll stop by every day to check on your progress."

Lisa drew a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry to spoil your pleasure, Logan, but I'm quitting."

His eyes were enigmatic. "I didn't know you were that wealthy," he said lazily. "Where do you expect to get the money to pay the judgment I'll get for breach of contract?"

"You wouldn't sue me," she said uncertainly.

"Wouldn't I?"

If a shark could smile, that's what he would look like, Lisa thought dazedly.

THE NEXT MORNING, Lisa was on the set even before her early call. After a restless night, there were dark shadows under her eyes, although it really didn't matter. Tony had elected to do a big love scene this morning, one in which she was supposed to look ravaged because the leading man was leaving her for another woman.

It's only make-believe, she reminded herself, *a silly pursuit for overgrown children*. But when she threw herself on the bed as the script called for at the end of the scene, Lisa sobbed as though her heart would break.

"Cut!" the director called. "Print it. That was great, kids, we got it on the first take."

The punishing klieg lights went off, leaving the set in blessed dimness. Lisa felt drained after the emotional storm she had been through. By dint of great effort she had managed to still the sobs that shook her slender frame; now she was trying to pull herself together in order to face the crew.

A hand closed over her shoulder and a deep voice asked quietly, "Are you all right, Lisa?"

A tremor shook her as she recognized Logan's voice and her hands flew up to cover her face. What a mess she must look! She didn't want Logan to see her like this. How long had he been there? During the whole scene?

She ran for the dressing room and, ignoring Logan's commanding voice, slammed the door of the trailer assigned to her, leaning against it with bowed head.

"Let me in, I want to talk to you," Logan demanded.

"No! Go away! We have nothing to talk about and I... I'm not dressed."

"I've seen you in less," he said harshly, "so open this door!"

"Logan! People will hear you."

"It's your choice. If you want everyone in on our private affairs, that's up to you."

Lisa hurriedly unlocked the door, her cheeks flushed. Hastily brushing away the tears, she faced him resentfully.

He took in her fevered eyes and uneven breathing. "I was concerned about you, Lisa. I've never seen you like you were out there."

She turned away from his too perceptive gaze, going to the dressing table to pick up a comb. "Surely you've seen performers in action before," she said, trying to control the tremor in her voice.

He came up in back of her, looking at her intently in the mirror. "Were you acting, Lisa?" he asked quietly.

Their eyes met and held in the mirror. "What do you mean?" she asked fearfully.

He turned her around, his hand sliding up her neck to cup her head under the tumbled mass of glowing hair. "All that passion, all those tears—were you really just reading words that were written for you?"

So he *had* guessed! Lisa turned her head, her cheek inadvertently nestling into his palm. She closed her eyes, but all of her senses were quiveringly alive to this man she loved so much. "You don't stop loving someone just because—" Lisa's head shot up, her eyes wide with horror at the inadvertent admission.

Logan's face went very white under his tan. He stared at her wordlessly before sudden joy flamed on his face. Then he folded her in his arms. "Oh, my darling! Do you really mean it? I never guessed!"

For just a moment Lisa allowed herself the ecstasy of being in his arms. Her hands wandered restlessly over his back, tracing the width of his broad shoulders. Then sanity returned and she pulled away.

"You don't have to feel sorry for me," she said.

He framed her face in his palms. "Is that what you think I feel?"

"I'm glad you never guessed," she whispered. "I tried so hard to keep it from you."

"You'll never know how well you succeeded," he groaned. "There were times when I thought you hated me."

"Oh no, Logan, you couldn't have!" Her cheeks colored. "You're much too experienced not to know how you affected me."

He stroked her hot cheek tenderly. "Yes, my darling, I knew how to play your beautiful body until you wanted me, but I thought it was because you

were so innocent. That any accomplished lover could do the same. It drove me wild to think that Bruce—"

She put her fingers over his mouth to stop the tortured words. "There was never anyone but you."

"Then why wouldn't you let me make love to you?"

This was the hard part. Could she make him understand when sometimes it had been difficult to convince herself that she was doing the right thing? "I knew you wanted me, Logan," she began in a low voice. "But I wanted to be more than just another body slipping briefly through your ed."

He looked at her incredulously. "You mean you couldn't tell that I'm out of my mind in love with you?"

Lisa almost stopped breathing. "You . . . you love me?"

The smoldering passion in his eyes threatened to break into flames. "Would you like me to show you how much? Let me love you, Lisa," he roared. "No commitments, just love me."

His words sliced through her painfully, but she knew that this man was her destiny. If all she could have was a tiny part of him, that was how it would have to be, because without him she was only half alive.

"If that's the way you want it, Logan," she sighed, winding her arms round his neck.

"It isn't what I want, darling," he murmured against her satin skin. "But I'm willing to take anything you'll give me."

His hands were building fires in her body, yet Lisa's dazzled mind managed to register his regretful words. "What do you mean?" she gasped.

"What I really want is to marry you, sweetheart. I want my ring on your finger to proclaim to the whole world that you belong to me forever."

"But all this time—as far back as Pago Pago on the yacht—you assured me that if I came to you, it would be without commitments."

He kissed her gently. "You had made your views on the subject very clear and I was afraid I'd frighten you off if you knew how I really felt, so I pretended I didn't want any ties either. I can't pretend any longer, but it's all right, darling. It's enough to know that we belong to each other. A piece of paper couldn't make me love you any more. Nothing could."

Unexpected tears spilled over at his tenderness, and Logan kissed them away. "Don't cry, angel, I promise I'll never try to pressure you into anything you don't want."

She gave him a watery smile. "If you're not doing anything tomorrow, Logan, do you think you could find time to marry me?"

Incredulous joy flamed in his eyes as he cupped her face in his palms. "Do you really mean that, Lisa?"

Her long eyelashes fell as she untied his tie. "Unless that's too long to wait."

BACK AT Lisa's apartment, very late that night, he stirred in her arms. His lips slid warmly over her bare shoulder. "I have a confession to make. I lied to you, rosebud." She looked at him uncertainly, but was reassured by the teasing light in his eyes. "I intended all along to trick you into marriage."

"How?"

"I felt sure you would want our baby to have a father," he said mischievously.

"Now why didn't I think of that?" Lisa marveled as Logan reached for her again.



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SEASON OF DREAMS • Robin Francis

FOR THIA AND LUC, LOVE BECAME A SHARED OBSESSION... It was ironic that the Stratford, Oregon, Centennial Celebration was to be held at the Warwick Inn. The old hotel had been purchased by Domini Developers and was to be decorated by Sommers Nurseries. Thia Sommers and Luc Domini had both fled the town after high school. But Thia had returned...and now it seemed Luc had come back for her!

**Look for these stories
and many more in
future issues!**

ACROSS

1. Use the kiddy pool
5. Sty animal
8. Like a pancake
12. Heavy metal
13. Duo
14. Slant
15. Whitewall, e.g.
16. ____ of Man
17. Prepared fruit
18. TV's "Mike ____"
20. Rescue
22. General Hospital workers: abbr.
23. Lendl of tennis
25. Hue
27. Wear for Lana Turner
30. Request at the laundry
34. Health locales
35. Eradicate
37. Play part
38. Ignited
39. Bigwig
40. Males
41. Summer treats
43. Spanish mister
45. Oceans
46. Individual
48. Comedian Red
50. Epochs
52. Eternal
53. Tide type
56. "Rock of ____"
58. High thoughts
62. Last, but not ____
64. L.A. athletes
66. Ontario's neighbor
67. Donny's sis
68. Despicable

69. Prom attendee

70. Pace
71. ____ Whitney
72. Kid's castle material

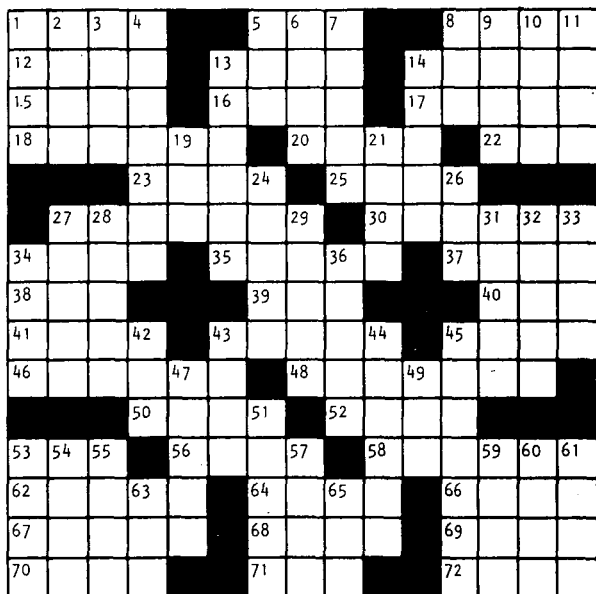
DOWN

1. Accompanying
2. Opera song
3. Coed's sleeping place
4. Foes
5. Owns
6. Lubricates
7. Alexander the ____
8. Southern state: abbr.
9. Actor Jack
10. Mimic

11. Williams and Mack
13. Hook, for one
14. Wasted
19. ____ Marie Saint
21. Carpenter's tool
24. Chutzpa
26. Road surface
27. Nutmeg for one
28. H₂O
29. Pours
31. Juliet's love
32. Neat
33. Barnyard fowl
34. ____ of the tongue
36. Wheel part
42. Compass point: abbr.
43. Hosiery catch

44. Alter, as copy
45. Easy and Della
47. Speak publicly
49. Guided
51. Tennis word
53. Shade trees
54. Prepare eggs
55. Nude
57. Go by boat
59. Region
60. Hold on property
61. Put in the mail
63. Drink slowly
65. 1051 to Romans

Solution on page 51 of this issue.



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Harlequin

WORLD'S BEST

Romances

JAYNE ANN KRENTZ—Legacy

Honor Mayfield didn't know it yet, but she was about to walk into a trap. She thought that her chance meeting with Conn Landry was a fortunate stroke of luck, but actually Conn had planned to lure Honor into his web for a very long time. A piece of her past was linked to Conn, and he wanted revenge!

VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON—Mingled Hearts

Faced with financial pressures, Stephanie Collier was forced to share her oceanfront apartment. But she soon realized that living with Lloyd Barclay wouldn't be easy. They had opposite views on almost everything—from her beloved pet macaw to his ultramodern furniture. And opposites attract...which made her life even more complicated.

ROSALIND CARSON—Lovespell

Talented Blythe Sherwood had always wanted to be a singer, but handling her own tour-guide business came first. Then rakishly handsome Michael Channing heard her sing and offered Blythe the chance to perform in his popular nightclub. Blythe was sorely tempted, but wary. What would happen when the smoldering attraction between them flared out of control?

TRACY SINCLAIR—Stars in Her Eyes

Lisa Brooks hadn't been in Hollywood long, but already she hated that glittery world where everything—and everyone—was for sale. But producer Logan Marshall thought all beautiful women wanted something from him. Logan was partly right: Lisa did want something from him—something called love.